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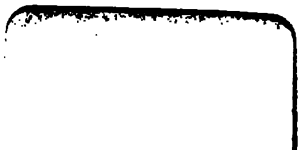
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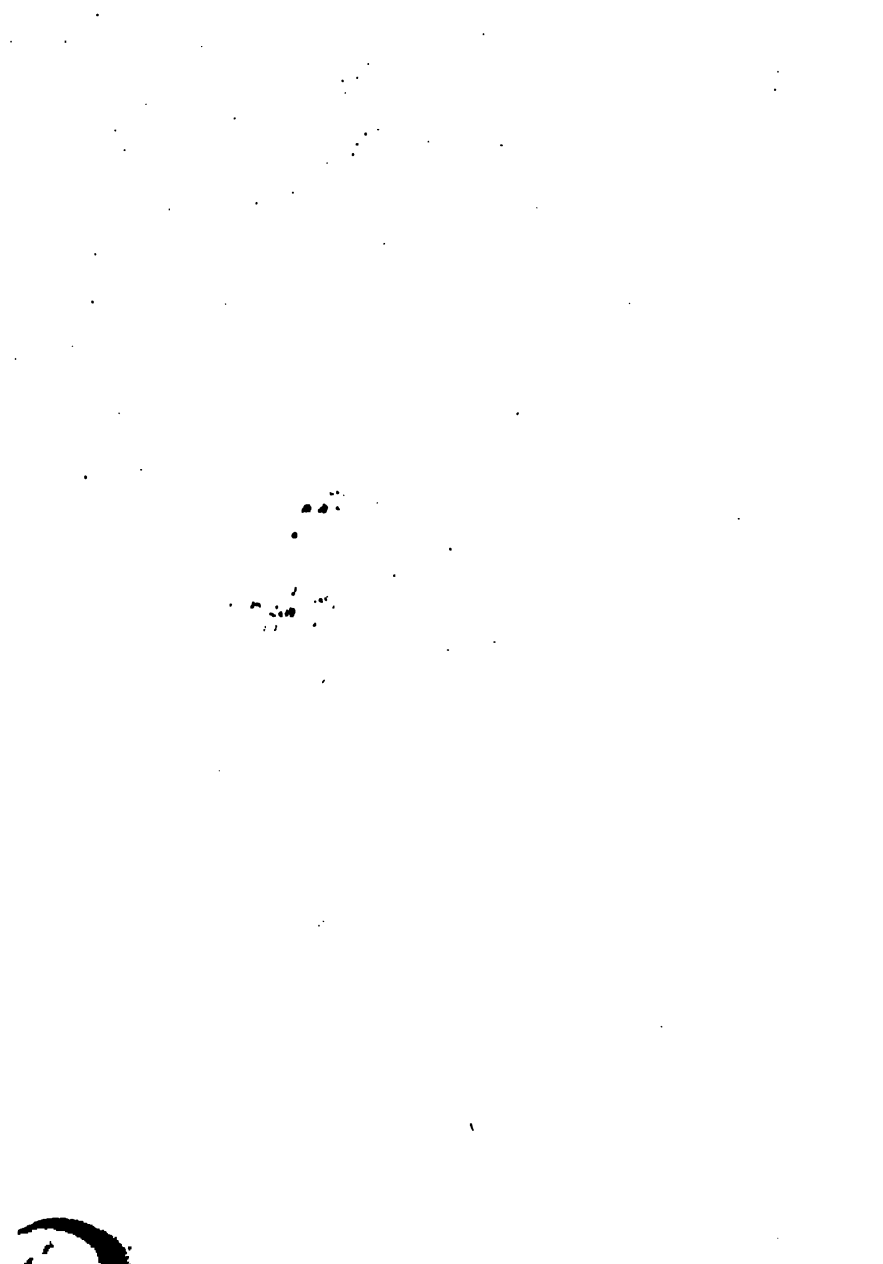
# MAC OF PLACID

T. MORRIS  
LONGSTRETH



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I had no thought except to despatch him

# MAC OF PLACID

BY

**T. MORRIS LONGSTRETH**

Author of "THE ADIRONDACKS," "THE  
CATSKILLS," etc.

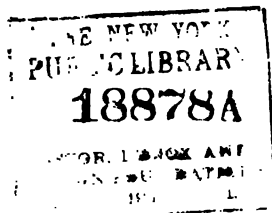


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**AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED  
TO  
MR. AND MRS. ALFRED I. DONALDSON  
FRIENDS TO MAC AND ME**

JUN 13 1921



## INTRODUCTION

The following portions of letters to my friend Alfred L. Donaldson of Saranac Lake, long a friend of Anson MacIntyre, will interest only those readers who like to hold the causes of things in one hand while fondling the effects with the other. Others had best turn to Mac's tale, diligently, and not bother over how it came to be.

*From letter of November 17, 1918, to Mr. Donaldson:*

. . . I have admitted that your way of celebrating the armistice was pretty good; but when you hear that I had a week back on the Opalescent with Mac and griddle-cakes and venison and a complete line of his conversation, you will obsequiously grit your teeth. . . . The upshot is that I'm full of an idea: I'm going to do him up into a romance tighter than the four and twenty blackbirds in their pie. What d'ye say?

Mr. Donaldson said that he had long thought of as much but was too busy and would be glad to give me any aid he could. Mac and I visited him together and a development called forth this letter, of November 30th:

*Lake Placid*

**MY DEAR D.:**

You have the amiability of a seraph! So has Mac. So have I! It is a seraphic world. Listen to this: When we left you I wanted to go out to borrow a book at the Stevenson House from Mrs. Baker while Mac was looking at guns. But when I told him where I was going he said, quite eagerly, that he might as well go too and see how the old lady was getting on. First surprise: I didn't know he knew her. On the way out I was airing my admiration of the natives' luck in having had

R. L. S. buying bread from them, when Mac, smiling that little quizzical smile of his, which is pretty naïve for a lad of fifty, pointed to the porch window and said: "You're always looking for a story. There's a good one about that window. It's the one Robert Louis and me clumb out of the day the lady novelists come to call on him."

"Robert Louis and *you!*" I shrieked, paying no attention to the automobile that was running me down. "Did *you* know Stevenson!"

"Sure I did! Ask Andrew Baker."

"You knew Stevenson and have never told me," I continued, after he had pulled me from almost under the car. "Man, you're no friend of mine."

"Well, I never did see how to lug it in," he said. Now, is n't that Mac, for all the world!—this Adirondack world of ours! Of course I began at once giving him opportunities of lugging Stevenson into the conversation, and when Mrs. Baker had brought in the tea and the doughnuts I set Mac and her to reminiscing at each other. Mac'd say, "Now, don't you mind the time . . .?" and she'd come back with, "That was after you'd had that skating spree with him, remember?" And he'd go on, and she'd go on with these intimate details of *him*, until it set my blood boiling to hear them. Think of their having spent a whole winter with R. L. S. and *not* talking about it, when I'd give a year to have had a ten-minute monologue from him and you'd never hear the last of it! However, as I was saying, you are a seraph and if you've read this far that proves it.

*Letter to Mr. Donaldson dated January 1, 1919:*

. . . I turn from lecturing Mac to wish you a Happy New Year. If I were a dishonest person I'd date this yesterday or the day before and allow you to blame the mail for the consignment of wishes not reaching you on time, but, as I say, I have just been lecturing Mac, and on honesty. Only now have I extracted from him the truth about a certain good act of his toward our heroine. Which do you think is worse, concealing benefaction or murder?

If I were a mining company I should be more successful at digging these intimate little facts out of him; but as I'm not, too much is left to chance. Chance brought me to Placid and chance made me friends with you and with him, but I'm afraid to leave much more to chance, so when you see him next I wish you'd draw him out. The clam is a selfish animal. You know, Donaldson, if we spoke out completely in this life we'd scarcely need a next. And I declare that it profits others very little if a man share his last crust with another but withholds his own soul. . . .

After many a consultation as to what facts to use and how to present them, since the Bakers and sundry others in the book are still alive, I was able to send him this note, dated February 12, 1919:

MY DEAR LIT'RY ADVISER:

I'm relieved that you think it all right to stick so closely to the facts (my whole idea of fiction, if you grant the right of omission). I've had some mellow evenings with Mac and his family. He is almost reconciled to (but not, I fear, a bit flattered at) the prospect of print. I excavate a memoir or two from him every night and mold it in the morning, and if it is n't Anson MacIntyre in the end, nor yet myself, I am in high hopes that it will be the Adirondacks of that aromatic age when he was twenty. But how the excavations have brought the man to light! I always admired him; now I love him. And what would n't I give to have been his shoulder-to-shoulder pal then instead of merely his present arm's-length Boswell!

The mining and molding became a very elusive joy and after several false starts in the latter I sent three samples to Mr. Donaldson, who interrupted his work to advise me. The following letter conveys his verdict as to treatment:

. . . The third method, by all means. To report in the third person that Mac did this or Mac did that leaves him as lively as a man in a shop-window and as much at home. And that

is not our Mac. On the other hand, your first person holds too true to the vernacular. People won't bother with dialect, no matter how interesting and true to the Adirondack vocabulary. Out out the ungrammatical stuff (except in the dialogue) and bring the narrative all to the higher level. I like the whole cloth best when tailored a bit.

As ever, A. L. D.

Which is what I did,—writing down the succession of incidents in strict loyalty to the spirit of Mac's tale but in my own words. So remember: *The "I" is MacIntyre, the handwriting mine.*

The result is not out of keeping with the flannel shirt that dries on the back of as true a gentleman as ever blazed a trail; and yet it tries not to exclude the sense of setting or to disguise the essential dignity of those set, for these woodsmen are full of so-called poetry and if they took the trouble to write there'd be more real literature on the American shelf.

I might as well end up this hodgepodge of an introduction with a word as to the man himself as he was in the eighties, a period when the Adirondacker was n't very partial to portraits. He stood five feet ten in his lumberman's socks, well balanced on his legs without being either stocky at the waist or lean in the shoulders, which could carry their pack as easily as a mountain wears its trees. He held his head, which was not quite long enough to be called aristocratic, with a pride that might suit the aristocracy,—easily and true.

It is harder to put a friend's face into words, since it all flowers in the eyes. MacIntyre's eyes were set fairly wide apart, beneath well-marked brows, of a dark, arresting shade, darker than brown. And they met yours with a frankness that probed deeper than the senses. His hair, only something less than black, was thick, with a little wave at the forehead, not quite curly. His smile spoke kindness, though not when the eyes withheld their approval.

All in all, it is no wonder that women thought him handsome. Certainly, however, no clearness of profile, no fineness of feature could have given to a man, to me, that subtle satisfaction which comradeship with him gave — gives, rather, for God knows, there is no need yet of turning this into an epitaph. Indeed, if the wind stays as it is I shall land a lake-trout over his boat-side this very afternoon.

Nor is there need for you to laugh at this assurance. He knows where they hide on such an afternoon as this, when the sun rides on the ripples and the new green of the birches shines to heaven on the rising slopes. There's no doubt about that fish. Nor none about what comes after; for when mountain-side and lake and sky reach that harmony of hues which is evening, we'll draw up the canoe on Moose Island opposite old Whiteface, kindle the fire, spit the luckless trout, and in the mellow after-mood watch the great mountain slip into the night. For a long while, perhaps, we'll say nothing, just listening to the voices of the waves and trees telling over the secrets of the Ancient of Days. Or perhaps I shall say, "Mac." "Huh?" "Tell me of that time when you . . ." and I'll remind him of what I want to hear. Then, if he feels like it, he'll get under way, stringing one slow word upon another, until I am gripped again by the twin talons of youth and daring and flown away with — flown away with through a darkness lit only by his pipe, and the lake-shine of the stars.





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**MAC OF PLACID**



# MAC OF PLACID

## CHAPTER I

### SOME NECESSARY GOSSIP

**T**HE winter I was born — 1869, if you can trust the family Bible — was a great wolf winter in our part of the Adirondack country and you can still hear Myron Hooker tell how Elmira Estes was pulled down in broad day between the White Church and John Brown's and how Dan Barton escaped an eating by a mere yard between his barn-door and the pursuers' jaws.

It was a wolf winter because the snow had come before Thanksgiving (and the cold with it) until it lay deep enough to crush the very hope of its ever melting. Indeed, the night I was born there fell, they tell me, such a skyful of snow that it was three days before my Pop could shovel out a trench to the pig. And when he did he found that she'd been eaten to the last kink of her tail by a wildcat, though our house was but a couple of miles out of Lake Placid village, at that.

They named me Anson MacIntyre for one of my forebears who'd earned his salt, and the Scotch porridge it went into, sheep-herding among those far-away hills which yet are not so unlike ours, I have heard. And something of his dreams in the misty heather must have come over with the name to me in my cloud-blue mountains, mixing with the wail of wolves and spell of the snow that made the atmosphere of my Ma's laborious days during the dawn of my existence.

Certain it is that the first thing I remember is playing about the great protecting roots of a giant pine and feeling all of a piece with it and the brook that pattered by. I was glad when the wind soothed through the top and the sun glowed down the fields and away; but there was a storm-strain that ran through me, too, and I liked it when Ma would look up from her ironing and say there was thunder brewing and for me not to run too far away.

Our house sat open to the four winds, and how they did like to worry it! I can remember nights when the gusts would roar through the woods beyond our clearing, tear across the open, and shoulder against the stout log sides, and I'd brace myself in bed against them until they'd leave and go rolling along the back of the forest and die away. Other nights the rain'd fall on the shingles, only a foot above my ears, like a long-continued story, and I'd drop asleep feeling as cozy as kittens; for although Pop made a mess of most things, he *could* carpenter, and no matter how she'd rain, I knew never a drop would come through. Like many of the neighbors' homes, our house was clayed between the logs and corner-fitted, with a big room for kitchen and living in, and another opening off where Ma and Pop slept — when they'd tired each other out with the scolding, complaining, and back-jawing which made staying indoors as unpleasant as it was pleasant out.

From our house you couldn't see many houses — just Byron Brewster's and Led Hooker's and the White Church on the road to John Brown's, beyond the tavern with its dingy clapboards and dirty panes. All these places seemed pretty far away when winter fell, and even in summer, when Ma'd send me over to borrow something — I was always borrowing something for her, from a lemon rind to a wash-boiler. Often I used to wonder why she never sent Pop. Later I found out. He could never walk that far, though it was absolutely no trouble for him to foot it down to the tavern

after his day's work. This was almost my first surprise in life and the mystery was not cleared up by an answer he made to me: "You'll find out when you're married, 'Son.'" He only laughed when I asked him when that would be.

The seasons sped and I began to find out that all was not happy with the world. I began to live less in the birds' nests that I found and more in my own home. Quarrels that had been but tones to bruise me now became conversations which cut deep. Ma'd say she'd rather have a full wood-box and an empty man but was blest with the contraries. Pop would reply that he was pretty patient, he thought, to put off getting mellowed up till nightfall. And they'd have it out about the stove-wood and the potato-digging and her clothes and everything else that can come up between a long-married and worse-mated couple.

I suppose I was about eleven years old when their jawings reached the quick, and I can remember going without meals many a time to get out of hearing of her shrill bark-bark, his whine and whimper beneath the tongue-lashings. For always did he get the worst of it. My Ma was a tall woman with very black hair and dark, narrow-set eyes that had not a spot for softness in them. Her nose was large and her mouth ran straight across, as if all kindness of nature had been stamped away by years of scolding. I can imagine now that she must have been very fine once, and commanding, but all had been turned to flint and the flash of scorn for Pop and the "poor lot" he was.

Pop was her opposite in every way — short, with sandy hair and eyes very mild compared with hers, that never bothered to look deep into yours. He wore an eternal blue shirt, open to the hair on his chest, and there was something always frayed about him. Ma, on the other hand, I never saw untidy, and she was always scrimping to be able to buy a ribbon when she'd go over to Saranac Lake. Father'd let her go only about twice a year, though it was n't ten miles



away, and he thought twice was once too often, his particular remark being "What's the use in appearances!" and all of this was an occasion for their scrapping as regularly as the cow went dry. He "mellowed up" at the tavern with equal regularity and at much shorter intervals.

How I did hate that house, with its flapping shingles and its long-faced keeper! He had the longest face I've ever seen on anything short of a pig and I'd go around through the fields if sent on an errand near him — I was still borrowing things from anybody who would still lend — just to escape the crawling feeling I'd have at the sight of his leather lips and poker nose. But my dislikes were soon forgotten, those days, in the pleasure I had in living and in make-believe. I'd pretend that I was a hedgehog and crawl up to the very tops of the hemlocks the way those prickly little bears do, or I'd be a buck-deer and go quietly through the forest, snorting and sniffing the air. And when Ma and Pop would have a set-to I'd run out of the house into the sweet familiar clover smell of spring, pretending that I was a deer escaping from hunters, her voice being the hounds. And I can remember creeping back late at night, listening, one hoof poised in air, like a doe at the snapping of a stick, ready to whistle and bolt back into the darkness if the hounds were still at it, like the creature I was.

Besides Pop and Ma there were three others in our house I ought to mention for completeness' sake, though they scarcely stand out so real in my memory as does the brook behind the house, which was but running water. There was my brother Bill, some ten years older, who ran off after a shooting behind the tavern, and my sister Alice, who died that same year from having the windows nailed down (so the doctor from the Forks said, and I remember his gray look as he said it), and a man named Seth, a kind of combination uncle and hired man, who dwindled away on longer and longer visits somewhere, until he came back no

more. These three shadows of my before-eleven life troop back unwillingly — chiefly in the act of eating the boiled potatoes and bacon three times a day — and I can see them only dimly, sitting about, elbows on the table, disgruntled, waiting for Ma to lift the kettle of boiled potatoes from the stove, to carry it to the sink, pour off the steaming water, set it with a rattle on the table with a “Thar, you lazies!” in her hard, proud voice. Then she would stand aside and watch them eat — disdainful, almost good-looking. She never seemed to belong to us, somehow.

The wide-lifted wings of experience were early ready to beat downward upon me. I first saw their shadow on a day in spring. Pop, who had been increasingly unpopular at home, to judge from the baying of the hounds, and who consequently had spent more time at the tavern, took it into his muddled head to prevent my mother from having her spring picnic over at Saranac Lake. It had been better for him if he had let her alone. I can bring to mind yet how she gave it to him, reared on her hind legs, as our saying went. I had run out into the strawberry pasture, but had to listen, and the rowdy noises the two made sent the shivers around my body.

“Poor Pop!” I thought and crouched down behind a little balsam, my body drinking in the new warmth of the sun and feeling at home there. “Poor Pop!” ran the echo of my feelings, though by rights it should have been “Poor Ma!” who was never through her potato-boiling and floor-scrubbing and who never got out into the real sweetness of things.

Soon they came out on the stoop, she flaring high with anger, he stooping low to avoid it, and then I saw her strike him — the first time all their eddies and waves of wrath had ever broken into blows. It hurt me as if a man had run a knife across my inside and I cuddled closer down than ever in the wild-strawberry bloom, the soft sunlight being for the first time powerless to heal the hurt of that picture — the

bow-shouldered, stumbling little man as he turned toward the tavern, the dark, hard woman standing malignant on the stoop — my Ma, to whom I dared not go.

Spring was the time when the loggers, who had been in the woods all winter, brought their harvest of slaughtered trees down on the flood. After the spring drive it was their custom to drink up their earnings, in the saloons scattered along the frontier entrances to the forest. Often a body of them would stop at our tavern, singing, cursing, and carousing by the night; and I can remember the sight they made rolling along the road — great grizzled hulks of men, and sometimes younger fellows with muscles that stood along their arms like live bits of their own cord-wood. Late in the evening, when I'd look in at the tavern window to see if Pop was ready to be led home (for I often went to fetch him), I'd have a chance to look more closely at them, a husky lot of stubble-faced animal-men, and always I felt a certain admiration and a certain fear. But I hated them when by chance they'd stumble by our house in daylight, singing rough songs and throwing clumsy kisses to Ma, who seemed to like to come out on the stoop to see them. She'd even dress up in her good dress if she knew they were coming by — this was to taunt Pop — and her height and black hair made her good-looking, for all her narrow-set hard eyes.

The younger fellows liked to joke with her, too, and sometimes when Pop was n't at home one or another of them would go into the house. Once one of them, a big laughing fellow with shoulders like a side of beef and a neck as big as a barrel, took her right up into his arms and kissed her. She laughed in a way she never did for Pop and let him hug her close to him, and I felt that same hurt in me that had come when she had struck my father that other time. And I ran out of sight.

I had nowhere in particular to run to, and not even a friend to visit. I had done too much borrowing to be welcome at any of the neighbors' houses, so I spent the afternoon pretend-

ing. But you can't pretend that you've had supper much after sundown, and yet I could n't bear to go home to the mush and boiled potatoes that I knew Ma'd have ready, for fear it would seem like taking sides against Pop; so I went down to the tavern to wait outside until he was ready. I knew that after he'd been there as long as he had he'd need me.

There was a wild-plum tree glowing pale in the edge of evening in the field behind the tavern and I lay under it, soaking in its fragrance, which is that heavy sweet sort that makes you close your eyes for blind delight. What with the quarter-moon hanging like a bird's nest in a great birch and the south wind creeping out of the forest, heavy with half-guessed promise to any one who cared, I could have lain out on that grass all night, happy, if there had n't been my Pop, getting staving drunk inside the crazy building, and my Ma, endlessly cross, waiting for us at home. I was a sensitive codger then and those quarrels took all the loveliness out of things for me. So I lay beneath the wild plum, hungry, nervous, while the air hung sweet about me. I never get a whiff of that rich scent even now without the memory of that dreadful night shivering over me like heat lightning from some storm, horizon-down.

Pop came out of the tavern finally as full as a pitcher, and I joined him, taking his hard, cold hand in mine. It was n't so far to our house, but it was wondrously dark in the wood and the wind suggested a wildcat here and there among the branches. I never stopped to think whether wildcats had a tooth for whisky, which was my Pop's particular flavor.

It was a lonely journey at best, but doubly lonely that night for two, when one was n't in his right senses. Drink certainly does drive out of a man the person you know, leaving a stranger in his place. And the stranger holding my hand was none too sure-footed, allowing the slope of the road to direct his choice of way, which would n't have set us on our home steep very soon, seeing that all slopes lead to the gutter. So

I held on to him as best I could, while he thought I was a hunting-dog and patted my arm, saying, "Good 'Son, pretty 'Son; sic 'em, 'Son!" until I felt, myself, like a pet spaniel that had brought him a stick from the pond.

The house was dark and as I helped Pop up the stoop step and held him there while I opened the door with the other hand a chill came out of the doorway as real, as shivery as if it had come from the ice-house. I *knew* something had happened. Ever since I had been able to slide from the stoop steps out on the grass I had had a sensitiveness to woods and sky and fields and air that had sharpened my instincts to a compass-point and that's what makes a good guide. And that night I did n't have to see what I was going to find out. I knew it ahead and hated to go in from the night's soft air to that room, half fearing to have that logger-man rush upon us from Ma's bedroom with his iron-pointed peavey, or dreading to hear her scoldings begin again. But despite our stumblings nothing but a lurking quiet came out of the dark, until, while I was feeling for the lamp, I almost wished I could hear her complaining. When I had struck the match, there upon the eating-table was a knife, caked a dark red with the blood of the last chicken it had killed, thrust through a paper with writing on it.

"Tell me what it says," I begged of the tottery creature beside me.

But I need n't have asked him. He stood fingering the paper, blank-eyed, quite helpless, a dribble of drink oozing from a corner of his mouth. That picture was cut into the walls of my brain, I think; it is so plain yet: the scrawl upon the paper containing a secret; his inability to read it. Drunk or sober he could not have read it: that had been my Ma's last jab of all. No more could I, for I had kept from school as the hare avoids the fox, dreading to be fastened within any four walls. But in the embarrassment of that secret writing and the stupid stare of my Pop I made a vow to learn my

letters for future emergencies. So there we stood, the lamp flickering in the faint breeze, throwing its tongues of light on the uneven ceiling while wide mouths of shadow swallowed up the light. A curious new elation at being mixed up with great events came on me. "She is gone, she is gone," raced through my thoughts as I steadied him to their room.

Once steered there, he was too muddled to take in the sight of the bed, mussed and littered with things but empty of my Ma. "She is gone," pounded through me and I felt a moment of wicked happiness before a hollowness seemed to swallow up the joy. I toppled Pop over on the bed and took off his boots, spread the comfortable across him, and watched him gurgle and recede into his sullen sleep. Then a loneliness far more intense than I had ever felt in the dark forest of Panther Gorge or on the wide summit of Whiteface Mountain assailed me and I crept, whimpering, to my attic.

For two days Pop lay in a drunken stupor and when I could no longer stand not knowing what was in that paper I put on my shoes and slicked my hair and ran over to the Hookers' just as they were finishing breakfast. Mrs. Hooker, a nice, soft sort of motherly woman, was cooling her coffee in the saucer and Amos her husband was pulling on his boots when I burst in upon them with the note in my hand.

"Can you read?" I asked.

"Why, even Led can read," she said. "Can't you?" Led was their boy.

"Never mind teasing him, Ma," said Amos. "What's it say?"

She read the note and gave a gulp of a scream and passed it to him.

"Is it very bad?" I asked, trying to read their faces. Led Hooker, who was a year older than I, was eating griddle-cakes and making faces at me, and I tried not to see him or the cakes either, as for six meals I'd had nothing but things of my own messing.

"You're too young to know," said Amos. "But it looks as if your Ma had gone for a visit."

"Just for a visit?" I asked, with a funny sinking of expectation. The disappointment showed in my voice and Amos laughed, saying, "Well, I guess it'll be a fair long one." His laugh nettled his wife, who stood by her sex at once, saying, "You can't hardly blame her, Amos." And he, "Well, Ma, you can't have the women running off every time there's a ruction to home."

"She's been led a skunk's life."

"Which ain't unfitting for a skunk."

"You have no right to call her that."

"Well, think. Ain't she bred a parcel of polecats? Remember her Bill?"

"Sssh! the boy'll take in what you're saying."

"I don't count him in. He's different."

They went on arguing about my family, while I listened though partly paying attention to Led, who was stowing hot cakes and pouring out the amber syrup on more from a leaning tower of them on the stove, the appetite for a bite of one raging within me. Though the ears of eleven are sharp, I could understand very little of what they said until Amos asked, "Where's your Pop, Mac?"

"He's still making up for his night."

"It'll take a lot of making up," he said with a wry face. Mrs. Hooker had turned to Led with, "Ain't you going to help little Mac to some cakes, Led? For shame on your manners!"

"He don't want none, Ma. He never wants anything like the rest of us."

"Of course he does, selfish! Sit down there, little Mac, and I'll pour you some hot ones."

I sat, glad for the cakes, glad to throw Led into shame, for more than once he had bullied me out of a boat I'd whittled or robbed my rabbit snares. I got the cakes, but the shame

was missing, as he only wiggled his ears at me and stuffed down more. It was no wonder that he was shooting up like a birch and out like an alder at the same time.

"How do you reckon to get on without a ma?" he asked. "I'd miss mine."

I swallowed something beside corn batter but managed to say: "Oh! I guess I'll kind of beaver along, all right. I guess I'll shift to cook for my Pop days and be a deer nights."

"A deer nights!" exclaimed the Hookers.

"Or a wood-fox," I went on to explain, "though I like being an owl best. Would you like to hear me be an owl?" And I gave them that wild, unearthly "WHOO—Whoo-who-whoooooooo" of the big barred owl. Indeed, for that minute I was an owl, trying to scare my mouse across the path of moonlight, and I was gratified with the effect even on Led.

"Would n't that turn a brave man into a calf in three minutes, if he did n't know what it was!" said Mrs. Hooker. "Do it again, little Mac."

I did it again and Amos said: "You're a queer pup, kid, but there's the makin's of something in you, though danged if I know what."

"I know," I cried, glowing with their appreciation, a rare warmth to me. But when they asked me I could n't tell. It had just seemed to swell up within me without having come so far as words—something at the horizon end. But, anyway, they had started the swelling with their sympathy and as I walked home, full of cakes, with April shining like a world of buttercups about me, it seemed that with a mite more of that feeling within me I'd quit walking on the road and begin to float along above it. It was a dandy feeling and I had reached home and floated through the doorway before I knew I was there. But then I came down to level with a plop, like a frog in a pool, for there was Pop, rising from the muss he'd slept in, weak-eyed, miserable, trying to rekindle life from the whisky-drowned embers of his being.



"Ma's gone!" I cried to him, with a certain triumph in my treble.

"Gone?" he repeated, sitting down on the bed's edge. "Gone? Gone where?"

"I don't know. But there's just you and me now."

"Why has she gone?" he asked, stupidly staring about.

"Listen," I said with the preoccupation of enthusiasm, and I told over most of what I had caught from the Hookers. Beyond a groan now and then he gave small sign of hearing, leaning against a post of the bed, motionless, soundless, while I acquitted myself cruelly of the tale. Slowly as cresses creep from the muck of an alder swamp did understanding blossom on his face, and I was too full of my new importance in the family to bother with his bitterness,—to know the fullness of his suffering: the tragedy of Bill, the loss of Alice, and now this flowering of past discord. And when the misery of him did penetrate the first flush of my frankness and I ran to him, crying, "Don't you mind, Pop! we can both run the woods now," I had to wonder at his lack of interest. Those depths of wilderness which were my dream, my paradise, were a forgotten field of roaming to him. He said nothing.

"Don't you mind, Pop, like that," I went on. "I can fry doughnuts."

But even that assurance did not dislodge him from his silence.

"Never mind, I can work. Ha'n't you any work for me to do?" He opened his eyes upon my insistence and I was cheered to go on. "Work'll put hair on my chest, Amos Hooker says. He said Bill ought to have been made work."

"Bill," said my Pop, dreamingly; "first Bill and now her."

He was still thinking of far-away things.

"He said something else, about Ma," I went on. "He said it low, but I heard."

"What was it?"

"He said she must have been a damtorment, anyway. What's a damtorment, Pop?"

He looked at me with an expression of bitterness I had never known on his face and said, "It sizes 'em up, 'Son; it sizes women up the nearest possible," and with no further word walked stumblingly out into the flood of sun, I staring after.

Thus began the second period of my life — a motherless existence, an uncompanied camping-out with Pop. I was sent on no more borrowing errands; no one came to borrow of us, for a good reason; and though we lived near the White Church, we were as far from the church-goers as their neighbors underground.

## CHAPTER II

### PROGRESS TO AND BY AN INTERESTING EVENT

**B**IG events set up partitions in our lives behind which we never afterward can go; so it was only through the chinks and crannies of Ma's running off that I could look back into the abandoned region of those early days. Nor did I care to much, for now had set in the golden age of long sun-drunk days in the riverways, of windy climbs, of snow-shoeings and swimings and sugar-makings. It was a timeless period, uncaged and free from all those restrictions that make youth hideous — and civilized.

My Pop, too, from whom I'd really got the taste for the trailless life, soon made a good running-mate, dropping the habits Ma had got him into and becoming his older whimsical woods-hunting self. I remember the morning he pitched the clock out at the window.

"Danged if I'm not through with timekeepers, 'Son," he said. "And I guess you don't want a couple of black hands pintin' out what you should do, either."

"The sun's good enough for me, I guess."

"That's my theory. If it's sun-up and we've got no especial call to lie abed, then get up, I say. But if you and me's been coon-hunting half the night, what's the use of having a tin-canful of machinery cackling in a fellow's ear? Danged if I'll be a slave to a box like that," and out it rolled, spluttering, behind the sawhorse. Thus the days became time-free for us.

The question of food came to near as easy a settlement. We

ate what we had, and did n't wear ourselves lean wishing for what we had n't. But I could make your mouth water like a rock-spring, telling of the seasonables that rolled on our menu from rod and gun and berry-bucket.

"What have you got for that empty feeling, 'Son?" my pal would say, coming in with a haunch of venison over his back. "What's ready?"

"Corn-bread and roast partridge is all that's ready, Pop, and blueberry pie and milk."

"Is the honey all out? We've got to have a little smoking-party, 'Son, before the bears gets too busy."

"I seen some ducks over on Bennett's, to-day."

"Seen 'em? *Seen* 'em, only! That ain't like you, at all."

"And I thought I'd give you a look," I'd say, producing three of the beautiful wild-fowl.

But often we need n't have stirred from home for the larder's sake. Deer delivered their venison at the door, particularly the summers we'd remember to start the garden, and our soil was so right for potatoes that, give it a scratch and a slick, and it'd repay your kindness by a half-peck to the hill. Two bears a year supplied enough fat to grease all the "rheumatiz" and shoes that my father could lay claim to; partridges responded without comment to a tap on the head with a stick; coons were to be got for the trouble of treeing them, and trout were so thick in the streams that they'd bruise themselves rushing for the worm.

You might think it was too easy, but I had my times keeping Gruntie, my pig, and the chickens from the skunks, hawks, foxes, weasels, porcupines, and all the other beasts that thought I owed them a living.

As the summers passed my trips back into the great forest got longer, and more often would I go alone. I'd sleep at the foot of some great pine, wake, broil my trout, swim and loaf, for days at a time, dreaming of some fine, unfathomable future very like the present. The animals were comrades to me,

though not understanding, the trees were counselors, though I would cry out at times against their silence. I felt no loneliness when going away; only when I had made the round nearly, did my thoughts hasten along the home trail and I was eager to catch the first sight of the blue wood smoke from the chimney that would tell me of my home. Though Pop became less and less my companion, he was still my pal, my first if imperfect friend, the greatest object of my love, next to that other strange, ungraspable lover of mine behind the veil of nature.

"Hullo, 'Son," he 'd say as I sauntered down the dooryard.

"Hullo, Pop."

"Kill anything?"

"Not much."

Often we 'd say no more and I 'd look around the house, wind up the clothes-line from amongst the bed and chairs, lift the soap-tray from the stove, root Gruntie out of the closet, entice the rooster from the window-sill without knocking over the geraniums, and put some potatoes on to boil, and then, over our tea he and I 'd have a windier go at what we had been doing. Winters we saw more of each other, but by the time I had grown half a head taller, this being in my fifteenth year, I had begun to outgrow him in other ways, just a little at first but very surely. There was a whitish tinge to his hair now and his eyes were a dimmer blue, but they 'd regard me more searchingly. In fact, he looked up at me a lot, saying it was good for weak eyes.

And I guess I was a wholesome sight. I 'd got my growth upward and was already filling out, able to carry my canoe a mile or more without resting and cut a cord of wood after it. Being vain like other fellows, I used to like to feel my legs and arms, which were getting as hard as a mountain. But, on the other hand, there were lots of things to keep me from getting too "stuck on myself," as the saying goes: for instance, despite the new school rule they had n't caught me and

I could n't read a word, though I still kept the note which Ma had left with the knife through it.

One night I got it out, with a curious longing in me that made me more restless than I had ever been before. Pop and I were sitting by the stove, he poking tobacco into his stinking old pipe and striking matches and pushing them into the cracks of the stove (which is the memory of him that I do believe I'll carry longest), with his shoes off and the same old sleepiness on everything just as it had been for hundreds of nights. What I had been thinking finally broke out into words:

"Pop, I guess a little schooling might n't hurt me, might it?"

He looked up at me, startled, as if he had discovered the sights wrong on his rifle or a joint loose on his fishing-rod.

"What put you in mind of it?" he asked.

"Oh! Nothing much except we're kinder talked out and then again—"

"I got along without it," he interrupted in a sick voice.

"It's free. It won't cost me a cent of yours."

"Yes," he admitted, "it don't cost nothin' to get, but it's mighty dear to get rid of."

"Other folks don't seem to have much trouble; and then, again, it might come in handy. And I could read you the paper."

"The paper! What put you in the notion of it?"

I can't imagine what had and could n't answer him and we let the matter drop until the restlessness returned to me and I went to school. In those days school lasted only three months and was a sort of hazy propaganda in favor of knowing something about decimals and the Declaration of Independence; without actually forwarding knowledge of those commodities very much. But school did me the immense benefit of throwing me at last into life. Hitherto aloofness had suited me, but now something within me called for something more to

satisfy it and after the shivers of the first plunge I enjoyed my life within the school-house walls and was soon letting my father tree his coons alone while I traced out in my copy-book, "To be good is to be happy," and wondered why "pair" was just as wrong as "pare" and "pear" when teacher asked me to spell "payer."

There were only about a dozen of us in all grades and we were of many sorts, quite like trees in the lot outside, all covered with bark and pretty rough at that, though good-natured as day for the most part. The roll-call then sounded very like the tax-list now, being made of Marshalls and Miners and McLeods, Brewsters and Stevens and the rest, and of course there was a ringleader, a pair of them, in fact: Tess Mitten and Led Hooker, as I found out to my immediate chagrin. Tess and Led set the temper of the school in everything it did, excluding lessons, and maintained considerable of a circus while doing it, which was hard on Miss Nye, the teacher, but interesting for the school.

"What are you good at?" Tess asked of me the very first recess.

"Climbing and diving and berrying and —"

"Stupid, I don't mean that! I mean what can you do here?"

"Nothing much, I guess," I said, flustered at her closeness.

"Can't you even shoot spit-balls?" Her frowsy hair was almost in my face, and for all my size I stepped back from her, and she laughed saucily at me.

"Is it harder 'n shooting bears?"

She promised to show me and, indeed, was a wondrously good shot, being able to plaster them around the chimney of teacher's lamp when teacher was marking slates. But I saw but limited fun in it and this made me an object of curious interest to her. My ability to spell, which developed rapidly, was another, and my regularity in keeping her supplied with wild honey was a third and, I thought, accounted for her sud-

den friendliness toward me. But it was none of these things, as I knew much later. She was using me merely to pique Led Hooker. If I'd been less shy with her it might have been different, for I could beat them all at kick-the-wicket and the other kid games they played. Tess and I had one thing in common — the lack of a mother. She lived with an aunt, who made a remarkably poor substitute, and what I had turned to the woods for Tess had asked of the people around her, and had not found. Her wild eyes seemed animated by the loss.

Led Hooker was the same fellow that had hogged the hot-cakes that morning five years before. Now he had grown taller than I, but more sallow-faced than ever, with a desire for always playing people tricks. If he had n't been as lazy as sap on a cold day we'd 've all been in a vast peril; for even as it was, he'd go out of his way to put a lizard in a girl's lunch. Also, he had an immovable face which could send us to the switch for laughing at him without so much as his showing the wrinkle of a smile. I don't think his features ever moved, except his ears, which he could wiggle in a detached way; and if his features did n't move, I am sure his mind never did — his academic mind, that is, for the devil of his ingenuity was never long at rest.

Led and I were neither friends nor enemies, had nothing in common. He hated the life of the woods, hated even to be out in the rain, which I did n't mind any more than I minded my breakfast. He hated lessons and I think he really disliked most of the fellows. But he certainly did like the girls and had an uncanny control over them.

"Hello, Hattie," he'd say; "did you bring that raspberry tart for me? Sure, I'll give you a bite. Only one, though." And with a sublime impudence he would break off a piece for her, just the size he wanted her to have, while the rest went bulging down his own sallow throat.

"Feeling lazy, May? Well, I'm sorry, for you're going to feel a lot lazier before you crawl onto the corn husks to-



night. I've got an errand for you down to Nash's." And, unlikely as it may sound, May Winters, on getting the nod from his lordship, would take her direction, barefoot, wherever he directed.

As Led got older and his desires matured the girls were equally obedient to them, and in the talk that country fellows indulge in on spring evenings around the store Led's frank boasts were the envy and despair of us more inexperienced lads; though, to tell the truth, none of us cared much about being Led Hooker, for all his powers. And I aped him not at all, still going home after school to Gruntie and the chores and the wild-wood roamings which were still the real lift and bubble of my life. But now I roamed alone. Pop had drifted again to the tavern, was become no shot at all — in fact very poor company when out of liquor — and we had few things to talk of over the hearth the nights he was at home.

"Why don't you come with us?" Tess would ask sometimes, when they were getting up a berrying-party. And I would answer with some makeshift reply to conceal the fact that I still willed my own way. I did not know that to be foot-free is to remain fancy-bound, that the price of perfect liberty is perfect detachment. I did not suspect the ether of being empty. They did not make fun of me for going off alone — that is one great advantage of the frontier life — it breeds tolerance. But they did cease to invite me on their sprees. At first I did not care; then I cared but thought that I did not; and finally it took all my best stoical talents to avoid showing that I cared. Indeed, I should have been glad to indulge in anything as mutual as a fight; but there was no reason to fight. And then it was that Tess Mitten divined my situation.

There used to be a great patch of wild raspberries opposite where Seymour Dunn's house stands now, at the end of the first fairway of the club golf course, and I had gone over there after school and was fingering handfuls of them into

my reddening pail, the July sun beating on my neck, and a warm, delicious radiance beating back from the tangled ground between the bushes, when I heard the *ting-ting* of berries falling into another pail and saw Tess's tousled head bobbing above the green. She gave a mock grimace when she saw me.

"I thought it was Led," she said, eying me in her bold way.

"But ain't you glad it's me?" I replied, trying on Led's bold way of talking to the girls.

"That depends," she said, coming nearer. "How many you got?" When she'd stepped quite close she stumbled over a root — by intention, I'll bet it, now — with the quite natural consequence of my putting out my arms to catch her. And, since it was the first time I'd ever had a girl in my arms, though I had seen them in Led's often enough, I just hauled in a little and gave a squeeze.

"Quit it," she whispered. "I believe you're as bad as Led, all this while. Now, quit it."

I let go as she wanted, but she did n't edge so far away that the breeze was unable to blow some of her eternal hair into my face, where it tickled. I could n't think of a thing to say.

"Been fishin' lately, Tess?"

She did n't seem to know but kept squishing a raspberry between her thumb and finger, looking up at me once, her freckles making her prettier than she really was; more wholesome, at least, than her reckless-looking eyes made out.

"You're a queer kid, Mac; ain't you? — for all you're as big as a man."

I tried to chaff away an uneasy feeling that somehow I was n't doing my part, and she took me up with, "I did n't say nothing was wrong with you, but you're not like most. You're not like Led a bit, after all."

"Two wonders like that ain't to be expected in one village," I said, caring little whether I was like him or not, wishing only that she'd leave me be and go on picking. But she held on to her temper.

"I was near thinking you was nicer than him," she said.

"What stopped you?" I asked, she keeping still within arm's length of me.

"Pshaw! You're not grown up as he is."

I doubled my arm, reflecting on her remark, and feeling my muscle.

"And you don't want things, like other fellows."

The bright light of her eyes, the boldness in them, suddenly showed me clearly another partition in life, ready to be knocked down with the littlest push. But something, the lonely habit of reticence perhaps, held me back, though I said with my lips, "Sure I do!"

"Then I suppose you think you're too good for us down-villagers," she sneered, changing abruptly to another Tess.

"What do you mean, 'too good,' Tess? I never took a hang as to good or bad."

"Well, you're always so proud-like."

"I'm not."

"You are, though I don't know what of — your good looks, I suppose."

I laughed an honest laugh at that, never having had a mirror at home.

"Maybe you can't *pretend*, Anson MacIntyre," she said.

"It's a pity about you."

Why is it a fellow can't think straight facing a woman! I was so busy disentangling her from her words that I stood there like a baa-lamb, looking at her, both steady and uncertain, and all at once she flung up her arms about me and pushed a big wet kiss square on my mouth; and I was so astonished that I had n't the sense not to wipe it dry with the back of my hand, she laughing a fierce, low, almost crying laugh.

"Gosh!" she said. "Led don't do that. Led —"

"He can have 'em."

"He gives them back," she said, poised before me; but like

a simpleton I was kept by some intangible dislike from imitating the more gracious Led; and the look in her eyes, that had been almost a perplexed admiration, quickly turned to the flame of ardor foiled. Wheeling, she fled lightly through the bushes, pausing once (my last chance to follow) to call back "*Sissy!*" to me rooted there.

For the first time in my life shame spread through my body, and while I stood still in my brambles, my mind clearing slowly like a troubled spring, that cry of "*Sissy!*" grew louder and louder within me, until I felt it must be heard by Miss Nye, by Led, by my Pop, wherever they might be. My anger rose and I felt of my muscles in vain; they would not crush the offending thought. Hatred of something, perhaps myself, pervaded me. The great serenity of my youth had been shattered, that was the truth of it. Woman, who is often marred with dust though molded of divinity, had arrived in my life. But I did not realize it then, and foresaw no substitute for the shattered serenity. So I went home with but half a pail of berries and woke from my dreams that night at the sharp hiss of "*Sissy!*"

Credit me with the fact that I went to school the next day. I argued that I should be a sissy else. But credit Tess with the wit to tease me, at first subtly, later in the gross. Finally, she must have told Led and when he began to fix his teeth to emit that hated word I knocked him down. But I disliked having for an enemy such a burrowing, behind-the-back sort of chap, and the two of them took most of the fun of school-going away. Another winter passed and my seventeenth birthday with it; and then, Fate, seeing me dawdling along, thought she'd take more of a hand, I guess, and hustle things up a bit. Anyway, on another April evening before the wild plum was well a-bloom things indeed began to hustle and I stepped out into life, for the first time over my depth. It was the evening of the arrival of Mr. Ed Touch in our village.

## CHAPTER III

### "GOOD-BY, GRUNTIE"

**I**T happened that I had gone out to the barn loft to stow some things and was thinking along and along as a fellow will when he has work to do that takes only half his wits. Thanks to Tess and Led, school was n't a very hospitable place; thanks to Pop's coming back from the tavern crotchety and sullen, home was little like the retreat it once had been; and thanks to that impelling something within me, I had grown as restless as a mountain brook.

On the other hand, home was the only home I had, Pop my only Pop and, I could almost add, my only friend (though that would n't be fair to my little boy-pig Gruntie) and I was essentially a home body despite my wood-travelings. So life seemed closing on me for certain that dreary afternoon as with one hand I folded potato-bags, up in the loft, and with the other, as it were, counted my grievances. Yet I could n't bring my mind to leaving either home or Pop. Indeed, the less he seemed like the man I'd once chummed with, the more pity and essence of love I had for him, and in a fit of impulse I dropped the bags, let myself down from the loft, and went into the house to "redd it up," as we say, as it had n't been redd up for ever so long. My hope was that I could bring back those joyful days of comradeship between him and me. I promised myself to give up school and as I swept out the rooms, fixed up the geraniums on the sill, washed out a lot of clothes and hung them about the fire to dry, and kept little

Gruntie from undoing my work as fast as I did it I was once more happy in the old style, whistling like a tanager, while the dust flew.

And as for Gruntie, I think he understood. It'll make you laugh to hear it, but I had a real affection for that little creature, and he had something like it for me. Being a pig, he had the limitations of a pig, but *for* a pig I have never met a better. In the first place, he kept to a hunch he had got somewhere — not from Pop, certainly — that it was nicer to be clean; and when I found out that cleanliness was one of his principles, I used to help him along at it until he'd shine like a pink peony.

Then, again, for company he'd give up eating, which was certainly unusual in a pig. Winter afternoons, when I was paring the potatoes or mending Pop's socks, he'd lie at my feet like a hound, looking up at me out of his squint eyes with a most comprehending air, and, I declare, thinking more of me than of the parings, though their squintiness would twinkle with a suppressed fun that never lit the mournful velvet of my hound-dog's eyes.

He always knew when I was going to move to the stove and would be ready to eat the bit of crisping from the venison that I'd hand him, his little hoofs going *tink-tink-a-pat* over the floor and his little squeal trying to intimate how much he loved me. I suppose Gruntie's love sprang from the affection he had for the hand that held the victuals. If he liked me because I fed him I didn't like him just because he was (some day) going to feed me, which I suppose (as Robert Louis would have said) is proof of man's superiority to pigs.

How Tess and Led ever discovered this partnership-in-loneliness between Gruntie and me I can't say, for no one ever came to our house on a friendly visit who might have reported it; but find it out they did, and save it up they did, for the particular kind of fun that they and Satan had an especial taste for, the ideal time for it arriving an hour after

I had finished setting the house as straight as the Ten Commandments and had gone back to my work in the hay-loft.

The first I knew that those twin devils were about was at a shriek of she-laughter from the cow-yard and the sight of Tess and Led in full chase of little Gruntie across the enclosure. He scuttled so fast that he seemed to twinkle and I yelled to them to leave him alone. Led, sallow as ever, looked up, thumbed his nose at me, and — tripped over the returning Gruntie, who had sparkled between his legs. It didn't calm Led to hear Tess's laugh, nor me to find that they'd locked the loft door as a preliminary to their raid, making me prisoner.

Then followed the silliest spectacle that ever a fellow was forced to watch. Led, for all his laziness, was pretty stout of wind and stringy of leg and Tess was stout of leg and stanch in the wind, and there was much mud. Gruntie was a pig practised in the arts of puzzling, as he and I had many a time played tag, and for a while those three engaged in a triangular contest around that old cow-yard that made the dartings of disturbed water-bugs in a pool look monotonous in comparison. Even I was jumping up and down, holding my breath, throwing down hay when I thought it might interfere with them, for, funny as it was, I was afraid that my little Gruntie would be injured.

If he had been engaging in a straightaway he could not have exulted long. But he knew his cow-yard, the alleys behind barrels, all the dung-heap dodges, the various vantage-points which extraordinary expedition with a wiggle at the end might give to a pest-beleaguered pig. And he made the most of his legs, while they had to be content, as you might say, with his leavings. Somehow he always fluttered from their grasp, though now this was as much owing to his enamelling of mire as to any prodigy of speed. Once, as they ran beneath me, I was able to lodge a vast armful of hay in their path. Coming from the heavens, it surprised them and they

tumbled, cursing me, but continuing the chase. Gruntie took a breath. But again they were at it with increased animosity, laughing less, grasping closer to their prey. Again he dodged, again scrambled to the top of the manure-pile, this time took a last survey of his chances, and darted from the barn-yard with the two inveterates scurvy-close to his breathless bacon.

Home-going pigs are happiest. Poor little Gruntie did not know wherefore I had spent those hours scrubbing floors and making neat the cabin. Instinct told him that the defenses of the cow-yard had failed, no matter how elaborately he had tried to hold them. Instinct now hinted that the only place for an embattled pig was beneath the bed of his master — that old familiar bed whence a friend leaned every morning to give him a considerable scratching.

The excitement withdrawing, I guessed where to, and in a frenzy of fear for my scrubbing I threw down enough hay to make me a soft landing and jumped, ran, and was met on the porch by the noise of confusion triumphant. Gruntie had found the bed, and so had they. He had thought it safer behind the stove and had hazarded the change, and they after him, drumming with a broomstick on his ribs. Nimble-witted as he was, they were equally swift-shanked in pursuit, and ten such circuits of the room had brutified my housekeeping into a sight for slovens. Tess had mired the counterpane, Hooker had spilled the geraniums from the window-sill, and much traveling through the mess had done for the rest. I came upon them in a corner a-top the luckless pig, who had unwisely thought that the clothes-horse would make him invisible. I charged upon them with a cry of rage. Turning their faces, they saw me, struggled to rise, tried to elude me; but I slammed the door and confronted them.

"You — you!" I cried, choked with passion and disappointment.

"Well, don't cry about it," said Led, making for the door.



"Who's going to cry?" I answered, blocking him.

"I don't deny you know," he said, but with less assurance.

"Come on, Tess."

"No you don't!—not till you've redd it up as good as it was."

"Damned if I will!" He had his hand on the latch as I sprang on him, all the accumulation of wrongs that they had done me surging forward into that spring. He looked surprised, tottered backward, recovered a step, and then I caught him with a blow that knocked him further. He fell against the stovepipe, still hot, and a yell came from him that could have been heard as far as the tavern. It roused him, did that burn, to a sort of fury I did not think him capable of. But I was glad. We went to it, Tess obliterating herself somehow from the zone of action. I recall seeing her dimly through the dripping fury of Led's blows. I scarcely felt them, I was so eager in landing others.

Once he got in on me and I had to wipe the blood from my eyebrow, but I got one back on him that cracked his lips on his own teeth, Tess giving a scream. In return he printed a bad word on my body with a force that sent me whirring, and in the come-back I knocked him across the corner of the bed; and I'd 've pinned him there but for the knee of his I met in my belly. I got that aside to feel a community of fingers about my throat, and for a moment the world narrowed down to the grasp of those two fists, Tess screaming, "Now, Led, you've got him! you've got him!"

But she screamed too soon; for, thanks to the grimy wetness of both of us, he could n't hold and I broke loose and grabbed him. Now there was no hitting possible. We were a lunging, straining, bleeding, double-souled, single-bodied figure. We writhed on the bed, almost identical in the flesh but divided in the spirit like a creature trying in an agony to cast out some intimate devil. The room whirled about me, Led squirmed under, a sort of twilight in my brain kept me

from thinking anything but that I would end him and his tricks. It also kept me from feeling pain.

And now a change in our relative powers was apparent to both. Led's wind, already whistled out in his long crack after Gruntie, was suffering from our clinch. The pause had given me mine. There was a moment of thrashing about, a sharp swan-struggle; the clothes-horse fell in a huge clatter against the stove; Tess shrieked and huddled out of our thrashings' reach, and then through the heat of my besetted anger I felt a new glow, the glow of triumph. A minute more and I should have him, should end his career of mocking me. Who was "Sissy" now? I had him, flat. And then his head slipped from my slippery hold and he cried to his partner, "Tess! Tessie! why in hell —"

My shoulder closed the conversation, but his call for help had reached her, toppling whatever indecision she might have had, and she flew to help him, crying, "I've been waiting, Hookie."

Shrill in her ardor, she fell upon me, still totally engaged with Led, and began a shrew digging of my scalp with her sharp hands. The sudden pain drew back my head. The sudden injustice of it dragged a cry from me. Harder she pulled, but I held to him, struggling in his renewed hope. Now I had him by the throat, but an exquisite fire seemed to be burning into my head. It was Tess, who was wresting my scalp as well as my victory from me. I could not endure such torture long, and there flared up in me a fierce hatred toward such unfairness, toward her sex. But the pain in my brain abated nothing, and, giving a last convulsive throttling to Led's neck, I had to let go and fall backward. He, to my blind surprise, rose and instead of turning on me, made for the door. I tried to take Tess from my hair. He opened the door, calling to her to follow, but not offering to help her from my grasp. When he was gone I threw her from me and tears of mortification came to those bold eyes.

"The coward!" she said; "and me so good to him, whenever he wants."

I stood before her, nonplussed as on that other day.

"Oh, how I hate him!" she wailed.

I did not hate him. I merely despised him for running. Nor now did I hate her as much as I thought I was going to. But it was too sudden a change for me to say so. But nothing is too sudden for a woman, and all at once she stopped her breathing in so quickly and looked up at me, saying:

"Do you hate me an awful lot, Mac?"

"Well, not particular," I said.

"You've been awful mean to me, Mac."

Now this took me so by surprise, since I was under the impression that all the meanness was coming from the other direction, that all I could do was to take a preliminary breath, on the top of which I caught the smell of burning flannels. This broke me from the spell of those eyes and I began to go angry again as I pulled the clothes-horse from against the stove, to find the socks and drawers and things that I'd spent the day washing and mending had been making little flannel crisps of themselves these five minutes. It was the last straw, this destruction of things that my Pop and I needed, and I guess she saw the anger glooming in my face or else heard the stumble on the porch that came to my ears, for she jumped up, darted across the room, and was out at the door like a singed cat. I heard the rattle of the porch boards beneath her feet and my father's half-drunk laugh as he tottered on the threshold.

"Don't run, girl, jest because I'm arrivin'—jest because I'm arrivin'," he called to her, and I heard her singsong, mocking answer: "You're full as a leech, full as a leech, full as a . . ." fading down the road.

I started out with a bitterness within me. Little Gruntie, maybe sensing what was coming, pattered out ahead of me, running between my father's legs, already unsteady enough.

He aimed a kick and missed. He lurched in the doorway and grabbed at me, his embrace smelling of whisky.

"Stay a little minute, 'Son. Everybody running so makes me giddy."

I tried to get from him, gently.

"You don't seem tearin' glad to see your Pop."

He had reached that loquacious stage where the drinker's mood is liable to wander over into wit or wrath. All seemed detestable to me and I tried to free myself.

"She your girl, 'Son? Didn't know you had a girl." Then his voice took on that hardness that hurt so: "But I might-a known. You're all the same kind as them, all the same kind."

Twilight was doing its best to soften the mess that he was about to see. "All the same," he went on, "you and Bill and your ma, just the same *swill*."

He jerked out the last word so fiercely, his humor had veered so suddenly, that, although used to the fickleness of the bottle, I jumped, and he laughed clownishly, adding, "Just the same breed, Bill and Ma and you." He entered the room which I had worked so hard to make inviting for him, and which indeed did look like a sty.

"And the trouble of raising you, when I might-a known!"

"Pop," I cried through the dusk, "be yourself a moment." And I watched his face for some sign of that other man, my pal. But I found nothing in his blurry eye to retie my affections to. He was not the man I knew, and my explanation died in my throat.

"What's it?" he said, stooping. "Mud on the floor, clothes all over, and burnt."

"Led and Tess were here."

"Ay, this is a real home-coming, and I thank you, 'Son, thank you, thank —"

He bowed drunkenly and sat heavily on the bed. One of its legs, weakened by the fight, gave way and tumbled him

among the geranium muss before I could put out my arm. He rose in a sudden fury.

"You and she planned it! You planned to insult your Pop. Go wid her."

"Listen, I'll put you to bed and you'll be better soon."

"It's a trick. Bed'll break. Go wid your girl. You planned it. Git!"

"Do you expect I'd stay?" I said, my stomach rising at the sight of him, my heart going sick within me.

"Git! Join your ma. Ye've done me all the dirt you can."

The misery of it seemed to close around and choke me, but I could n't bear to leave him that way.

"I did n't mean it to be like this, Pop. I had it cleaned once and Tess and Led —"

"You've eat my food and used my house and — and I thought you'd be different, Anson-boy." His voice changed again and I thought I had him, only to know a fresh disappointment, as he caught sight of fresh disaster and flared up again: "Git! I won't have you making a mock of me," then repeating Tess's singsong, "full as a leech," he added, "nor your girl making a mock of me, either. All the same."

The tussle had taken most of my strength, and this new bottomless trouble took the rest and all I could do was to say: "Can't I come back to-morrow, Pop? We was fine pals once."

"Git!" he muttered thickly, groping for the broken bed-leg.

"But, Pop —"

"Git!" he yelled savagely, having wrenched the bed-leg off. He was no person I had known, no person who had known me. His face seemed misshapen through the mid-twilight and as he stumbled toward me he lifted the wooden leg, cursing. He would have sent it crashing on me, and I fled.

I ran into the road and stopped. He was not pursuing, though the noise inside told of his drunken rage. The cool

breath of April fell out of the yellow-fading dome of sky. Its emptiness seemed to mock me as I passed over to the barn. It was dark in there, and the old familiar smell of hay and cobwebs brought the first sharpness of my new pain to me. A gross obstruction rose into my throat and I pressed my finger-ends into my palms, tight, for I must not be a "sissy." Was I to give up this, my home? Had I actually thought of doing so in my earlier discontent? I knew now that I loved it better than the width of the whole world, and an ache I'd never known before possessed my being. Anguish was notching this moment on the record of my life as I notched my rifle for every buck well slain. The obstruction in my throat swelled until I felt as if I should die from within, for no tears came to ease me. Then from the further darkness came a little squeal, a *tink-tink-a-pat* of tiny hooves across the floor, and the crowding friendly impact of a body snouting eagerly into my pockets.

"Eh, Gruntie, Gruntie, little boy!" I leaned over and scratched him and knew that he was pleased.

"No, Gruntie, no apples this time — no more times, little boy."

And then the weight of sorrows broke me, and like those long-brooding storms that must be loosed at last, I lay in the hay and wept the bitterest and longest of my life, the little uncomprehending brute near me, wondering possibly why, but never knowing that the immortal soul beside him was in the throes of its first mortal sickness.

## CHAPTER IV.

### AT LOGGERS' HEADS

**H**EALTH, sheer animal health, is the great drug and balm, and mine, being a health of considerable intensity, had me up by the time the first chill of night was falling, and out of the barn, clear-headed and above all hungry. If my eyes showed trace of tears, I knew such air would wash them clean and, being too shy to go to any of my neighbors for food, I started off toward the tavern of flapping shingles and broken panes.

From youth I had distrusted the place, but as the roadway slid beneath my gait the pile of bread and cheese that I expected to consume grew momentarily steeper; and while I was shy of loggers still, the heat of even a husky-haunted tavern would not come amiss. But a new and even stronger motive was moving in the hollowness within me — the need for company. For the first time in my life I wanted a friend. I was just torn from all that I had loved; I must find a new object of admiration, for love was as necessary to my happiness as faggots to a fire. So, when I caught the sounds of carousing from the tavern, through the encircling stillness of the spring night, I broke into a run.

It was evidently one of those loggers' nights when the men, fresh from the drive on the river and not yet committed to their stone-patch farms, were ridding their hearts of lonely memories and reinforcing them against still lonelier drudgery. It was their night of nights and the nearer I came to the ridge against which the edifice sat, the louder broke their ex-

plosions of hoarse mirth. They were a great hand at laughter, the many horse-power kind, and capable of any joke, though more coarse than cunning in the disposal of it. I arrived at the rattle-shack, taming down my pace at the end so as not to be quite winded.

By the light that shone through the dull panes I saw the faces — or rather, what was visible of the faces — of three girls, yellow against the glow, intent on some sight within. Indeed, they were so intent as to lean tip-nosed against the glass, and they tittered at what they saw. On hearing my step one turned her bold face part way and I saw that it was Tess. She gave no sign of awkwardness at the meeting, such as I felt, but immediately spoke to the others some secret about me, whereupon they tittered louder than ever, and she soon sang out: "Hello, Mac! Been scrubbing up all this time?"

"Hey, there, Mac," said another, May Winters, "Tess says she's got a lock of your back hair and is going to wear it."

"She can wear anything she likes," I retorted, but my voice was drowned by a new roar from within the building, followed by a burst of un merry laughter from the girls.

"There goes his other shoe. It's his pants next. Oh, my!" cried Tess, pinching May on the cheek.

"He won't have a stitch left 'less his luck turns."

"It's very decent of you staring, I must say!" I exclaimed.

"What's it hurt?" asked Tess, making that word with her teeth at me.

"You can't be expected to know," I said, "but any one that's *got* a mother, like May has —"

I think that registered, for Tess flew up, just like her frowzy hair, saying: "Oh, never mind for her! She's seen 'em worse off for clothes than that."

"For luck's sake shut up, Tess," said the third girl, "or Macky 'll tell our mammies on us."



The humor of this last thought sent them all off into paroxysms of giggles, which lasted until a renewed uprising of men's shouts and guffaws drew them back to the pane. I climbed the rickety steps, a dull rage and shame and curiosity contending with the hunger for food and warmth and companionship. The opened door let out a flood of lamplight and tobacco smoke and the smell of human beings.

There must have been well on to a couple of dozen huskies in the little room, backs toward me, and the blue clouds waving upward from their pipes and lying in the air as thick as a morning fog on the bottom-lands. Sol, the tavern-keeper, crouched over his counter, his eye-cracks missing nothing of the circled scene before him, while the rest, clumped in a mass of red shirt, bulky shoulder, and rough heads, were intent on what was going on over a hidden card-table. They had apparently all had enough liquor to be easily wrought on by infinitesimal humors. It was a pack, a wolf-pack, silent about some prey. And as I pushed into the ring and through it I saw, sitting there, naked except for his red flannel drawers, my Pop.

The astounding sight brought an exclamation from me that fell on the silence of the impending play like the crack of a whip on a colt's hide. The hushed, expectant men reared, so to speak.

"Shut up!" "Shut him up!" "Throw him out!" came their cries. Two laid their hands on me, but I shook them off, saying over and over, "Stop it! It must n't be. It must n't be." Confused by their clamor and the suddenness of things, I knew little of what I was saying and less of how to prevent my father's losing that last play and all his clothes. He, drunk as a rain-barrel, leered up at me, and the pity of that look, of that shrunken hide upon his body exposed to the bestial crowd, wiped out in me remembrance of the recent scene at home. I stooped to take the cards from his hand, but several grabbed and held me from my purpose,

while the man I wanted to protect twisted about and winked drunkenly at me as if we were in the midst of a joke.

"Oh, Pop!" I besought him. "Come home just this one time more. Come with me now." Moist heavy hands were clapped to my mouth.

"You have n't no home," he said thickly, and then, pointing at me, "Swill, just like his ma," and he tried to spit upon me, but failed, drunkenly.

I could have died for disgrace. It was I who felt stripped — stripped to the soul, bared to the utter cold of loneliness and shame. Silence succeeded as they dealt again, and, not daring to look at the play, my eyes fell on one of the players, perhaps because his eyes were fixed on me — eyes clear, amused, cold, of that crystalline light blue that one would like to trust, and can't. His was a face so different from the stubbly-chinned, lean, weathered countenance of the typical logger that it held me. Yet his gaze bothered me and I dropped my eyes to the table and saw that it was he who had accumulated most of the money and all my father's clothes. They took up their cards.

"After the drawers what damned thing will he lose?" asked one of the fellows, who was holding me, of the other.

"Only the devil knows, but even he won't keep the secret much longer."

"Mind the time Buck Edge bet his wife — and lost her?"

"That's one thing old man Mac can't lose."

"That's right. Well, he's no worse off." He laughed brutally. "Watch now."

All were intent on the play. The stranger was staking all the garments he'd won against the pair of drawers, and, barring a faint titter from outside the window, all was quiet, tense. I closed my eyes, for I knew the outcome and could not bear to see Pop shamed, when all at once there broke out a hubbub of cries from the tipsy circle: "That don't go!" "You lost a-purpose!" "Play it over!" "Skunk!" I

was being jostled; their voices sounded threatening. I looked. The stranger, his face pale, was pushing a pile of clothes over to Pop and rising. The slightly amused air had left his lips but lingered, I thought, in those agate-hard eyes.

"Play it over!" "You lost a-purpose!" "That don't go here!" they shouted, beginning to crowd in threateningly upon him.

"I'm through playing," he announced, his gaze resting troubledly in mine for a moment. He began pocketing the money. A youth beside him put his hand on his arm, saying, "Not so swift, stranger." It was Led Hooker. "We don't quit poker here at ten o'clock. If you cheated to get rid of those clothes, you've likely cheated to get that wad." "That's the stuff, Led, give it to him!" There was a little laugh from the men who knew Led. He was not noted for courage; he too had had a little too much liquor. The stranger paid no attention to him. Pop was staring stupidly at the clothes. I think I was a little dazed by the sudden turn, or by the stranger's bold stand, but the men, their heads tight held about the center of interest like a lot of dull-headed cattle about a food-bin, began to murmur. And Led, who was taking the stranger's silence for cowardice, suddenly stuck himself belligerently before him. The swinging lamp over the table was jostled and the swaying shadow threw us into alternate light and gloom, and disappearing and emerging stood that finely held man confronted by the sallow braggart Led. I forgot Pop, mouthing over his clothes, forgot my own plight of homelessness and hunger, forgot everything but the poise and coolness of him there, brazening out the pack, and that his predicament was from that act of generosity to a naked old man, my Pop.

"Drinks around!" cried Sol, thinly, anxious to avert a scrimmage in his tavern; but no one moved.

"Take that for cheating!" muttered whisky-brave Led, throwing his weight behind his fist.

"And that for your kind words!" said the stranger, his arm seeming to pretend to no force, though Led was overbalanced backward into the crowd.

"A fight!" "A fight!" "Down him!" "Get the cash!" "Run him into the river!" "Yes! the river! the river!"

Voices added to voices, shovings began, all were joining in the mêlée, and in an instant there opened up a fusillade of blows that resounded through the swaying twilight of the saloon, pierced now and again by Sol's cries for his endangered furniture, in turn overwhelmed by the rising tumult of the twenty half-drunks.

I knew two things: that the man's life, calm as he was, was in some danger, and that he had endangered it for me, or rather for my flesh and blood. With a wrench I broke loose from my captors and began working my way toward him, reaching Led, who had got his feet again.

"There's one for this afternoon," shouted Hooker, landing a crack on my pate. The blow was the necessary cordial to my anger and I won a place by the stranger's side.

"Good boy!" he cried out of the swaying dusk. "Two men are a match for twenty whisky-barrels."

But the whisky-barrels seemed to have a fairly energetic kick, though they were too close-set and impeded one another's manœuvres, pounding indiscriminately upon us and themselves. Their tempers rose with the welts we raised upon them, and the noise out-topped their tempers. I was thrashed hither and thither, striking in vicious return, keeping close to my partner, who was sometimes almost hidden in the break and roar of their surge and slash. Murder might have been the end if he, edging with me over nearer the swinging lamp, had not suddenly and with some dexterity reached up and extinguished its flame.

It was a clever move. The pushing, drunken, cuffing crowd melted magically into a darkness deeper than any gloaming.

At the same instant he took me by the arm, saying fiercely into my ear, "Now for the door, my good fellow!" Burrowing like moles through the swarthy turmoil, we made for that faint oblong of light. Arm in arm we thrust for it, giving a healthy return in thumpings for the receipts upon our own heads and keeping a strict silence, for all our pains. I minded them little, being electrified by him, so cool, so close to my admiration that I thought I had never admired before.

It was tedious, but at length we won our way with the usual success of purpose over indecision, and pulled open the door. Behind us a jostling, angered pack of half-wits was struggling in the interior darkness, hunting for our heads and finding one another's. The uproar from the darkened cage must have been heard in the village, I thought, as we stood upon the stoop, nearly exhausted, each clinging to a railing and drinking in the revivifying coolness of the night.

"Give me three pulls of this air and it'll clear all those sty-vapors from my head. How's yours, kid?"

"Ringin' like a church steeple on Sundays."

"You kept it, anyway," he laughed. "A head is the best of keepsakes."

He was standing, leaning against the shut door.

"Come," I urged, "or we'll both be in the river yet."

"I'll be right with you, but she can't wait any longer," and he struck a match, cupped his hands, and lit a cigarette, the quick light shining back into those astonishing-clear eyes. It was a bit of bravado that we paid for, for from within a surge of pounding shoulders smashed against the door, there was the sharp tear of splintered wood and in less time than it takes for an oath he, I, the cigarette, and four or five men were lying in a heap at the bottom of the rickety stairs.

"It's the stranger, Mart. Hie, there, get him!"

"And that damned meddler with him."

Quick as the cry, I was on my feet, to see more men pouring out at the door. My companion pulled himself from un-

der two, when a giant logger, Tim McLeod, raised a stick and brought it down on his leg. His groan searched my taut feelings and I grabbed the pole and dealt an awful thwack on McLeod's head. He sank under it into the road and though I was in the very seethe of excitement, I can still remember how I felt to see him crumple down in a heap.

"You'll mourn for this, Mac," shouted some one who recognized me.

Putting an arm under my friend, I pulled him clear of the mess, trod down a half-prostrate logger who clutched at us, and backed with my man into the dense shadow of a cedar thicket.

"Come, quick! We can bolt out the other side," I whispered to him.

"I can't, man, I can't go far. I reckon they smashed one of my roddings."

I listened. The turmoil was already passing down the road in full cry. Little did they think that we would stop beneath the tavern's very eaves.

"Well, I'd rather be lucky than wise," he said.

"It's a damned sight likelier," said I, thinking of his cigarette.

Just then the bushes parted ever so little and I thought I saw Led Hooker's moon-colored face. I made a dive. He gave a cry and ran, ran down the road as if he'd seen a brace of horned demons instead of a cripple and the partner whom he crippled in turn.

"We've got three minutes to live," I said, giving him a hand.

"That's right, be as cheery as you can," he winced.

"And I'm going to spend them eating. You start up that hill and I'll follow."

I ran into the deserted tavern, struck a match, rifled the ledge behind the counter of its food-supplies, filled my shirt-front with bread and a flitch of bacon, meal, and what not,

and raced back to the lank, groaning figure that was hobbling toward safety.

"It's not broken," I said, for I had let my hopes dictate to my fears, having already thought of the place where I should hide him.

"No — not *off*, at least — but I wish I'd been created an insect so I could change off on my other legs. How's your head, now?"

"The chimes has stopped ringing."

As he made less pain for himself on the down-hill, I turned to the river up which I intended we should go until safe for a long rest. Each of us was concerned with his thoughts, and overhead was only the vast quiet of the night, cool as spring-water and hung with stars as thick as lilies in a pond. His hard breathing ended once in a forced laugh.

"Let's get things straight," he said, putting out a hand. "I guess I owe you a life."

"It was risked for my father," I said.

"No, not for that man; for you."

"For me?" I repeated, well pleased.

He said something that pleased me even more, something very heartening, and stopped on the road, holding out his hand, adding: "You must know that Ed Touch is glad to make a friend. It happens rarely." The word "friend" danced through my veins and I thought that the night had been worth while, though rather fast living for a youngster used to somewhat less than three fights a day.

"Come," he said, "she's stiffening on me. We've got to keep moving. From your father's loving remarks I gather that you're not sleeping at home to-night."

"No, I've anywheres ahead of me."

"So've I. It's lucky we slewed across each other."

"But where is your home?" I asked.

"There!" He pointed to the ground beneath his feet,

with a short laugh. "You see it's a roomy one, it's always handy, and," he added, "it can't burn down."

"I've made myself at home there," I said, "but —"

An echo of a confused shouting came to us across the fields and turned into an involuntary shiver along my spine. We had reached the river and I bade him follow me into it.

"Why, it's ice-water, man!"

"You forget, Mr. Touch, who you're escaping from. They're men who know a trail as fast as an Indian." Was the stoop incident to be repeated?

"Go ahead, drive me into the water; but don't, for God's sake, 'Mister' me, man!"

"We need go in it but a few hundred yards."

"I could economize on a grave," he laughed. "It'd only be six feet."

With his hand on my shoulder he sloshed along, cursing with infinite variety as he stumbled among the rocks, yet doing as I suggested for the most part, begging me to keep a-talking, so that he might forget the agonies of his leg, which had sustained some injury just short of fracture.

To me it was a night full of the necessity of moving on. Led Hooker, I knew, for long had been anxious to get back at me, and now his nature, which yearned for long odds on his side, would be alert to take advantage of the blows with which Ed Touch had belabored the loggers' heads. There would be no easy place to subsist within ten miles that at the same time would be safe for us. But I kept the distance of our march a secret from my friend, as he, in turn, concealed his pain with talk, diverting, rich, thrillingly new. I felt very youthful beside him, though he was but twenty to my seventeen, and he promised to make up the discrepancy, saying, "Trust Ed Touch to educate you, boy," when I had exposed my ignorance on something he thought I ought to know.

We stopped, when too ravenous to go on, and ate; but get-



ting him under way again was so difficult that I promised myself there should not be another halt until we were safe in the retreat I had in mind. For the most of that long night it was he who kept our spirits up, when by rights it should have been I, and before morning I was bound by a fabric of fascination to this vagrant youth, this sudden friend, this new sort of being who limped, jesting profanely, at my side.

## CHAPTER V

### PHILOSOPHY A LA TOUCH

**W**ISPS of crescent cloud were already blossoming with dawn when we emerged from the forest upon the great meadow which lies at the foot of those passes appointed for our home until Touch's leg and the drunken humors of the loggers should have mended. Night rose dark behind us and still lay blue in the steep gorges ahead; but into them an opalescent radiance dropped momentarily from the atmosphere above, and Touch, forgetting the dogging torture of his leg, stared palely solemn into the wonder of the morn's slow birth.

"It's worth this journey across hell you've brought me, Mac. God, drunk on the wine of Paradise, could n't have dreamt better. Look at it!" He gripped my arm as the color fell from depth to depth. "Look at it, boy! ain't that god-damned beautiful!"

His fervor took my breath. Here was another side of the many-sided. For half a night I had been finding out the versatilities of this youth, who at one moment could make one's guts crawl with a lightly tossed filthiness and at the next be off on the undeniable wings of a dove. In all I was behind him, it seemed, except love of the woods, which he professed to hate. And now, as the light strengthened, I had my first real look at the fellow who had become friend over night. He was a little taller than I, less stanchly knit; his hair, face, everything comely and slighter than I had expected; and his eyes, so agate-clear as to seem to offer no protection to his soul, succeeded in keeping any of it from being revealed. I

had to find him out from his words, I concluded, and they were sufficiently diverse to make this no task of a moment.

As I studied him — resting his leg against a log, and intent on the marvels of my mountain-land — I found myself uncomfortably divided about him, wishing wholly to admire, afraid to trust wholly, though I soon dismissed this feeling as unworthy. He turned from the wavering hues of heaven, saying almost explosively: "To hell with it! What's beauty to a man with nothing under his belt," and then adding whimsically, perhaps because he caught the involuntary disappointment on my face, "I think that I could look all day at a sunrise like that."

"We'll be snug friends," I assured him, "if you love it truly. Sights like that is the blood-spring that keeps my veins full."

"We'll be snug friends, anyway till we need a change."

"That's not my idea of friends," I began hotly.

"I'd rather know your idea of breakfast," he laughed.

"Sit there and I'll show you." I pointed to a dry knoll that was being yellowed by the first sun and set about building a fire near him, while with groans he adjusted his leg to its new position, enlivening the atmosphere with all sorts of oaths that had never before been aired on Marcy Brook. I left him with some sticks to feed into the fire while I started to see if trout would bite so early.

"Don't stray out of sight, you savage," he called to me; "and don't freeze your feet off in that ice-water. We're short on feet now."

But I was chasing a trout into a corner and regardless heard Touch rave. It was a ten-incher.

"Not bad for snow-water," I said proudly, on my return, expecting to put it right on the coals. But he had let the fire go out.

"Where's the fire?" I asked disappointedly.

"It's here, somewhere," he said, starting to hunt around in

some black charrings. "I know it's here, sir, though I can't just lay my hands on it." He made such a fool of himself to cover up his negligence that all I could do was laugh and build another, and it was not long after I had its red eye winking at us from between the birch coals, that I had a kind of trout soup to serve him out of a birch-bark bowl. In the windless sun of morning we put by about as welcome a meal as ever garnished the stomachs of two refugees.

Touch actually licked his bowl, yawned, stretched until a twinge from the leg recalled him, and said: "Well, you've got me here, my black buckie; what next?"

"Up there," I pointed to the still-shadowed gap between Caribou Mountain and Mount MacIntyre. "Is n't it a beautiful virgin forest?"

"Beautiful enough, but damn its virginity!" he said. "I like roads."

"Trails are easier," I persisted.

"Beds are best. Can't we stay here, Mac?"

I explained how it was the first place our pursuers would come to and so he rose with an infinite deal of expostulation, saying: "Picture! — a one-legged empty-pocket named Ed chin-wacking with a homeless head-smasher named Mac in the month of April fools, in as God-deserted a wilderness as it ever rained on. I've sucked in the air from many a bum situation, but all the education I've had never told me the answer to this."

"Just keep smiling and it'll come to you."

"Goah, Mac! I've kept this smile on till it's gone rancid. What the devil keeps you so calm on the mug?"

I yawned back at him from sheer pussy-content. A drollness played on his thin lips. "Let me count your mercies," he said. "First, your considerate father's kicked you out of the house. Second, your esteemed fellow-villagers tried to boot you into the brook, because, third, you sided with a weary kind of cattle with a cracked leg and doubtful head

which is your humble servant. Any more mercies? Oh, yes: freedom of a trackless waste." I wish I could convey the irony in his laugh as he added: "Mighty trackless and an awful waste; at least it's wasted on me."

"And you on it," I replied, watching him pick his way across a log. "They say Saranac Lake'd pay high for a good clown resident."

"That's the only profesh I have n't tried."

"What'd you do before you tried loggin'?"

"Paper-mills down to the Forks."

"And before that?"

"Over to the Iron-works."

"And before that?"

"A little farmin', a little bummin', and a little schoolin'."

"Got no family?"

"Nope; never had."

"Well, that's better off than me, with mine scattered about, all living, and yet able to live with none. That's the devil. There's a lot I'd like to tell you, Ed, or rather wish you knew and yet me lack the tellin' of."

"We're all that way, kid," he said almost tenderly. "But you and me'll know each other pretty well if this keeps up much longer."

"This?" I repeated dully.

"Meaning misadventure. There's nothing like misadventure, Mac, to forward acquaintance. How long have we known each other? Scarce twelve hours. Twelve hours ago did I guess I'd be hobbling after a broad-shouldered slave-driving son-of-a-gun? Did I guess, moreover, I'd be hobbling through a blasted desert where the only food is fish-wash, the only drink fish-bathings, and where there's no female company? And, mostover, did I guess it'd be after a pair of wilful eyes, and them male, shivering all over for fear I'd let the fire go out again?" I burst into laughter; he went on: "I tell you, Mac, I'm not much used to these little

pleasantries of Providence, but I swear they're almighty useful for forwardin' acquaintance. I guess I'll know you pretty thoroughly in another twelve hours at this rate. Where are you going to lambaste the old worm to now?"

We had reached the foot of the steeper climb, where the habitual course of deer had filched something of a trail from the gnarled pathlessness of mossy granite. Trunks of great birches, of greater pines were fallen across trunks, and rocks were dripping on rocks while we skirted receding drifts of snow. The sun, nearing midday, scarcely reached those sea-green depths with its rays of fading flame. A fabulous silence weighed upon everything, as though all stir and life were yet to be added to a germinal world. Beneath the raised finger of this olden spell I fancied that even Touch, suffering as he was, subsided; and when we talked it was in tones subdued to the devious secrecy of that charmed passage.

"Nobody comes this way, ever," I whispered, "for just the other side that ridge lies Avalanche, which is far less trouble. Don't you have a thrill, Ed, being where nobody else goes?"

"A thrill at every step, kid. How much further?"

"It's right now. Sssh!" I held up my hand for him to stop, reached back for his stick, jumped a pace ahead, swung with a swift swish through the air, hopped into the balsams, yelling, dropped upon the ground, missed, hopped and dropped again.

"What in the devil ails you!" he called. "By my granny's gray hairs —"

Still fluttering in my bosom, it gave a squawk, its last, and in a second I held out before him a fine partridge, its wrung neck drooping over my arm.

"You're a fast worker," he said, smiling hungrily, "and I'll make a good target for some real food. That fish-spittle we drank down there is n't the kind of victuals, nor yet liquid, that I'm used to."

"Roast partridge'll help till I can sneak back down to

home and crib something staying. There's home for now, Ed. Just one more scramble. It's a bully cave when you get there."

He craned his head back and looked up at the ledge, and despite his leg a sarcastic smile parted his thin lips. "If you call that a scramble, Mac, I'd like to see your idea of a climb."

Swarming up, I gave him a hand. He attacked that last minute of effort nobly, without haggling with his injury, let it cry out as it would. The surmounting of the first ledge must have been agony to him, for he lay at the entrance to the cave, limp on the moss littered with brown birch leaves, the sweat standing out on his forehead and the color gone from his face. But when he opened his eyes and saw mine so troubled over him he sat up, smiled despite the twitching of the mouth corners, and said: "Well, I did n't play the coward, kid. But it was only the fear of playing it before you that kept me going."

"I've been a hard driver, Ed, but it's all over."

"Thank God for that!" and he lay down again, white with weariness.

The cave was a chance find of mine on a wild-bee hunt, and few others knew about it, as those who traveled the trails (meaning a dozen or so a year) preferred that through Avalanche Pass. A great slab of granite had fallen from a higher ledge and caught upon two boulders. With such portals and backed by the solid cliff it was impervious to all the elements, and roomy as you'd want. I made a bed of balsam boughs and coaxed Touch to stir himself once more.

"May the devil take me out walking if I ever move again!" he groaned, closing his eyes on the aromatic bed.

My preparations for housekeeping were made easily and to the accompaniment of a little song that made itself wherever it is inside one that unsung songs grow. "I've found a friend," was the burden of it and there were stanzas enough

to last while I chopped some fire-length logs, laid more balsam for our bed, cut some birch-bark against its thousand uses, and then chopped some more in case of wet weather on the morrow. Then I made birch-bark pails for water and sliced the flitch of bacon that I'd carried in my shirt, and the sizzling of it brought the water springing into our mouths. My pal lay there, a picture to invigorate the fancy, stretching long of limb upon the soft green, a bit ironical of face but ever suave of speech, adding salty remarks as a relish to my cooking. And outside our habitation (which the fire made home) rose the vast sky-effacing wave of MacIntyre into the clouded west.

Oh! That was a supper,—the partridge tasting as never bird had had the privilege of tasting before! After a little lazy talk, Touch pulling at his pipe with almost content, we slept, and oh, that was a sleep! And next day a cold rain fell, but we had wood and were warm and between the getting of meals and more sleeping had time to talk around the compass of two fellows' minds, exchanging much. And such exchange is the anchor-hold of friendship. For a girl can make sure of a man, a man of a girl, but two fellows have nothing but experiences to exchange, and if they be not generous in that, what common store have they!

But there was some lurking, unintelligible ache would come from time to time to the surface of my consciousness as he ranged from topic to topic but always with the sparkle of misbelief in his words. I had seized on him with my fancy, and longed to with my affection. I should have loved him at once if I could have felt that substantial thing one feels in my kind of people. For we, who cannot pour out words like water, mean what we do say. And so did he, during the space of his saying it and perhaps for a minute after. But beyond that limit I could not be sure and it disturbed me. For some of it I wished heartily to believe, especially when he called me friend. And I did come to believe, too, finally.



Once I joked him about it, I felt so sure. "I cannot speak truth, Mac," he said. We were about the fire at the end of that second day and he was in a serious mood. "Who can? — the whole truth. But I can say what I feel at the time, which is a damned sight honestest."

"I thought that was the way girls talk."

"You don't know very much about girls; do you?" He looked at me with those baffling eyes, so apparently clear to the bottom — of what!

"I can't say I do. I never've known any, very well, that is." I thought awkwardly of the raspberry patch, of my lost opportunity, of the word on Tess's teeth.

He drank in my thought, apparently, and added slowly: "And yet, having reached your age, you must have loved, not to say bedded with, a sight of them."

I don't think I colored any, even under his look; it was natural enough talking these things out with him.

"I never knew any that well, Touch. There's not such a raft of them about our diggin's."

He laughed, as clear, boyish a laugh as I had heard come from him.

"What's the matter with Tess of the shapely shanks?"

"Do you know Tess?" I asked, surprised most exceedingly.

"Certainly, and I reached your village at twilight the day of our little game — that's yesterday. She was hanging around that tavern for me, apparently. One takes those things for granted, anyway."

"I'll grant you speed," I said, but a certain gladness I had felt in his presence changed. He continued:

"Yes — Tess. Do you mean to tell me, Mac, you've let those opportunities slip? Oh, boy, boy!"

It was my turn to laugh at him, at his solicitous tone as if I had neglected some righteous duty.

"How old did you say you were, Mac?"

"Eighteen this coming winter."

"Eighteen, man-size, and still trainin' the tendrils of your virginity how they should go. Oh, Mac, you *are* a kid!"

He paused, his lazy lips curled in playful protest. I thought of Tess. Those had been her words, too: "You're a kid, Mac." I thought of Led and his boasts. A curtain seemed raised, shutting me invisibly, strongly, from them, from life. I forgot that I had just fisted Led out of my house. I forgot that I had just helped to rescue the superior soul beside me from a watery evening, if not grave. I forgot that I was even then his sole support. Immediately his advanced experience with that inscrutable half of life, the other sex, elevated him above me. We were not pals; I was his inferior, his follower, even though I should continue to shield him from nature and mankind. The injustice of this discovery aroused a dull anger in me. I could easily level this distinction and would. I would go out into life, deal ruthlessly with a few of the ladies, learn what was to be learned, establish an equality between myself and this young godling, and then, matters thus adjusted, resume my admiration of him. Admiration was necessary, and yet impossible while it was always being nipped by superiorities. The sudden tide of anger that carried the sweetness of these thoughts throughout my veins consumed but a second or two, but how long was the trail of purpose that it left behind them!

If there is anything sweeter than a bed of balsam for lazy limbs, it exists not in our corner of the world. To lie there, the fire making its musical talk outside, its flame-light playing on the roof, melted from granite to gray dreams by the spirit touch of shadow, knowing that I had but to speak out to get some comradely response — this was or would have been supreme happiness to me, so long used to the dumb companionship of trees alone. Little did my fellow cave man dream of the conflagration that his smiles and condescension had kindled. My life of loneliness, thrown into stronger contrast by those rare conflicts with Tess, Led, and their gang,

had gradually built up a toppling pile of longings which Touch's contempt had just set aflame. And as evening became night it burned inextinguishably, until rapt by the play of its fires I said half aloud:

"Damn it! I'll do it."

"Do what?" he grumbled in sleepy irritation.

"Go back for — salt."

"Don't let 'em catch you." He was thinking of the loggers.

"I'll take care of that." I was thinking of her other lovers. "Don't you worry if I'm fairly long away."

"Oh, I'll be here," he said grimly, and rolled over to close the talk.

I, warm with my resolve, could not sleep, but lay long watching the flare and wane of the fire, flickering on the firm rock. Once the very firmness and cleanness of the rock clutched at my throat. It and I had always had something in common. But a counter-joy surged up. To-morrow I should be a man, a man. I looked on the slumbering countenance of the youth beside me and tried to pierce the meaning of the flesh. There was a shadow as of something old and worn about him when the lids eclipsed those eyes, something not lovable. It required the laugh of him, the gaiety of his remarks to imprint his charm. Now showed only the cold disdain for those things I loved deeper than my life. I looked away from him with a sigh. At least we had already been through much together. He was my friend, was he not? I was unreasonable.

So I settled back upon the balsam and let the tide of time carry me off toward the immensity outside. But it was not quiet sleep. From time to time the burden of my purpose woke me. I replenished the fire. The night turned colder and lay, outside the circle of ember-light, abysmally black. Finally I could stand inaction no longer, and rose. Touch, roused for a moment by my preparations, looked at me yawningly and said, with that little easy scorn of his, "Be good,

my son," which was a very contrary benediction to the tone of its utterance.

Putting fresh logs on the fire and seeing that all was apt to his hand, I let myself down over the outer ledge and set out for the village with the wind of my new determination cross-ruffling that steady current of my past.

## CHAPTER VI

### MY DEBUT INTO MANHOOD

CAREFULLY wound cylinders of flaming birch lit the trail, which withal was very faint to the feet. The chill of the woods, still heavy with night and noisy with the drip of rain, urged me at a wild goose's speed and, I thought, on an errand very similar. But that was only at times, for as the bird wings north to its mating I was intent on the same direction for the same purpose; a purpose too recommended not only by nature but by the secondary desire to be no less than my new friend in experienced manliness — not noting that the sentiments of some are chiefly swagger.

It was no wonder that Ed Touch, a man of gaiety and conquest, should shoulder my affections and carry them anywhere at all. It is no wonder to me, even now, that I should have set off upon this mistaken course on his instigation. The wonder is, rather, that I did n't break all my legs on that rough trail, for my thoughts were not with my feet at all, nor yet in my head but in my heart. And as the heart speeds one the quickest, it was as if I had not trod the winding wilderness miles that conveyed me out upon our clearing and the village, still sleeping in the ebb end of the night.

My lesser reason for coming, which was the getting of supplies, was an easy preliminary to the other. I entered the gray darkness of my home and with the deftness of long knowledge of their places I assembled matches, salt, trout-tackle, sugar, two blankets, and many another item of comfort for caves. I had no scruple in taking them, "I've earned 'em," being the thought behind my hands.

As if on moccasins of velvet I trod the bare floor hurriedly, for dawn was graying through the window and we woods people wake early. As my hands felt over familiar things a pang of homesickness of desperate intensity overbore me. What was friendship or experience worth if they drove one from home? As stream water can run only one way, my feet took me to the door of the little room where Pop was sleeping, and all the old times gathered to my eyes in a mist of remembrance as I looked in upon him.

"Oh, Pop!" cried my whole being. "Let me stay home!" and my one desire was to wake him, to see the old smile of welcome come to his face, as it had come many a time for me returning from some hunt, folding the wrinkles into less grisly lines. Now the grayness of dawn seemed to reveal only a harsher grayness there. Unenlivened by the look in his eyes, his face, repulsively unshaven, lay like a dead thing in its sleep. And I knew that my memories were best. There came a smell of whisky.

This, then, was all I had, the last tie. My hunger for affection and the response of love awoke, stronger. I turned, choking, from the stale unseeing of the creature my Pop, and said farewell forever in my heart.

So I picked up my pack, took a last look at the frayed cushion on the rocker, at the black kettle that I had so often lifted, on the stove, and quit the house, beating down the last cry of homesickness with, "You fool, Mac! are you never going to grow up! Think of Ed!"

So I thought of Ed — and of Tess.

I passed the barn and heard a squeal from Gruntie, but steeled myself to answering not. I hid my pack in a thicket and hastened down toward Tess's house, hoping to reach the cow-shed where I knew she'd soon be milking her aunt's cow, before dawn discovered me to any loitering logger.

The street was as empty as stellar space, and as silent. I had a curious sinking in the belly or thereabouts as I opened

the door of the shed, a curious elation smothered in the possible embarrassment of being wrong. The only thing I dreaded was the appearance of innocence, and the mere knowledge that these things went on mostly at night made me waver in the horror of seeming childlike. But I was a lad stubborn in my decisions and I armed myself against embarrassments in the encounter by remembering the Touch gibes. Come what might, I would gain his respect; so I clambered up the stairway and sat upon a litter of hay in the loft, in the condition of a person about to go on the stage. Only, I had had no rehearsals. Thus I awaited the moment for my *début* into manhood.

It was a period as tantalizing to my mood as the converging bottom of the glory-flower must be tantalizing to the bee. But again my case was harder. For all the bee has to do is to struggle, while I had to wait, and while waiting think, and while thinking swing from one unalterable conclusion to another with considerable speed. Once concealed in the loft, I was all for arising and running away, all for sticking by my custom of cleanness and letting Touch laugh me to pieces if he could. Then the recoil would come and I'd say, "Shucks, Anson MacIntyre, why should n't you be like the other fellows! You're a fool."

Thus the minutes swayed me from side to side and back again. At the sound of my own name the old bright image that I had made of myself, brook-bathed and woods-clean, conjured up a loathing for that picture of passing from girl to girl which seemed necessary to the idea of pleasure to both Led and Touch. The next instant some alluring word would come to mind and the return wave swept objections out to sea. Meanwhile the minutes passed, the day made certainty of its lowering dawn, and still I sat among the hay, shivery, hungry but rather more constant than inconstant to my decision.

Yet even then I must have seemed a very laughable lover

to that ironical youth still doubtless slumbering in his cave. Certainly no emigrant from the shores of purity ever cast back glances so desirous or so comic; certain none in the long roll of lovers ever kept a rendezvous with a more vacillating animal inside. Yet I stayed, as determined to proceed with life and know it as those silly urbanites are anxious to know nature when they come up to our woods for a week in summer with some one else's text-book beneath their arms.

And then — I heard the snap of a latch and my decision was irrevocable. The fall of the latch was followed by footsteps on the floor below and the sleepy voice of Tess in no very ladylike terms requesting the cow to move over. The very coarseness of her expression pleased me, and with the sudden impulse of a diver who has been too long afraid to dive I took new heart in my business and raised my voice in imitation of a clucking hen, which sounded plausible enough. The ringing of the milk into the empty pail below stopped. She was listening. I clucked again. I heard her curious steps up the stairs.

"Is thet you, Led?" she called, a faint little quaver in her voice.

"Come'n' see," I called in as near his voice as a man could croak. My stomach had righted itself and I was eager now. It was pretty pleasant having a girl call your name with that little quaver in her voice. The steps neared the top.

"Don't jump at me and I'll come," she said, low. I scrouched down behind some of the hay. Cautiously, slowly — oh, how slowly! — there appeared, first her hair, always frowzy, and a basketful of it, then her eyes, roving and bold as ever, her nose and cheeks and mouth, big and meant to be kissed, and the armful of shoulders. She hesitated before the rest appeared, the waist of her, the faded skirt, the fat legs.



"For Pete's sake don't jump at me, Led! I'm scared of jumping."

She looked about, still mystified, and took a couple of steps in, and then I leaped, not at her but at the doorway — to block the way down in case she might want to escape.

Which was exactly what she tried to do, giving at the same time a little shriek, very little but very shrieky. I grabbed at her and put an arm about her neck and a broad palm over her mouth. She struggled like a hen that you've got under the arm, its neck bent for the knife. She was big, almost my size, and I had to try pretty hard to hold her. In a minute we were down on the litter, regularly wrestling. Of course I was stronger, but she was a double handful and it was scarcely a love-scrap at first. I began to sweat and the hay-seeds got in my eyes and stuck in her hair and I had always to hold one hand over her mouth for fear that she'd scream loud enough for her aunt to hear her.

But soon the breath left her body and she wilted all of a sudden, with me panting close by her, like a pirate ship lying alongside ready to board its prey. She found the wind to gulp out, "You, Mac. Of all fellers!"

"Yes, it's me."

"What you doin'?"

"You," I said. "Don't it look like?"

"Leave me up, Mac. I thought you was Led."

"I'm going to be Led for a little while. You pulled my hair; remember?"

She struggled once, like a dying fish. "Leave me up, Mac. Led's coming any minute now. He said he was. That's the reason —"

"I ain't afeard of Led."

"But he'd kill you. He's sore enough to kill you. He'd kill me. He's sore at me now, and I was going to make up with him. He'd give you away to the loggers. Leave me up."

Some of that eternal hair was in my face, in my eyes, but even this much mastery of her was sweet and I let her talk.

"The loggers is sore at you, Mac, something fierce, for helping that stranger off they had it in for."

"I ain't afeard of them, either."

"Led's hurt where you hit him, he says, and he's going to get even. Leave me up, Mac, and clear out. He's coming any minute."

"I ain't a-letting you up, Tess, till — till you say you're my girl."

A change came over her face and she gave a feeblener struggle. "Why, Mac, I thought you was a good boy! You never —"

"You never know," I said huskily.

A whistle shrilled in our ears. "Quick, Mac! That's his whistle. Leave."

"Not till you're my girl, Tess," I was not to be gainsaid. She put her warm arms about me and pulled my lips to hers, then flung me back as the whistle shrilled again. "You kid!" she cried; "I'm Led's special. He'd kill me if he knew."

Again it sounded, almost below us. But if it instilled terror into Tess, it had no such effect on me. My desires at that moment were as masterful as Touch himself could have wished and I would have disregarded a thousand whistlers. But footfalls followed the whistle, steps rose on the stair, and to greet them a dumb fright mounted to her eyes, and he called out, "You, Tess, where are you?" and "I'll get you where you're hiding." She slipped into the hay behind me in her instinct to hide.

In an instant he saw me. A white bandage about his head was the first impression made on me, his pale immobile face the second. It was a face gone bad. No wonder she feared to be found thus. And suddenly all the hay-seeds on my clothes, the sweat down my face seemed to be pointing to

my intention. If it was his intention, too, then I hated myself for having the same as his. He was tense with surprise and I speechless from being surprised. My foot felt her crouching behind me and the impulse to become her protector against him rather than her hunter was instantly born. All that had been healthy within me revolted from the last moments, as I began to measure my dislike for the shallow, bandaged bully opposite me.

"You son-of-a-gun! I've got you at last," he said with a snarl. "Where's Tess? If she thinks she can play fast and loose with Led Hooker she's got another think coming."

"She's probably in with her aunt, where she belongs," I replied, cool at once, and wondering how easy it came to lie, that being the one thing I thought I had a kind of pride in not doing.

"Her aunt must be dippy, then," said Led, "for she just told me Tess'd come down to milk. And there's a pail down there with a sprinklin' in it. And you — you look as if you'd slept too hot, Anson MacIntyre." He gave a queer laugh, and asked, "Where'd you hide her?"

"I have n't seen your girl," I said, "and don't want to."

"I can understand the last," he said, "but not the first, with her fat carcass lying behind you. You, Tess, get up!" He stepped toward us.

At that there was a rustle in the hay, a cry from her, and she did a queer thing — rushed over to Led. But he shoved her back with, "Get out! Get over to him, whar you belong."

I believe I have never seen such a look in a woman's face, such surprise, such sudden misery. I wondered if she could have had a real love for him, so passionately she clung to him.

"Get away!" he cried, flinging her down. "You common road-lier, I'm through with you." She burst into a stream of sobbing that I could not bear to hear.

"You are mistaken, Led. She's clean of me," I said earnestly. "You'll have to believe me, she's clean of me."

"I'll believe you," he sneered, "when the sun sets in the east and roosters lay eggs. You've fooled us pretty long, MacIntyre, and Tess has fooled me once, which is that much too often." Again he thrust her back.

How I hated the white steadiness of him! How I hated myself for getting her into the wrong, for the lie that had just left me, and for seeming to beg from Led! He struck her, and it unrooted me.

"You cur!" I shouted, making for him.

"Come on," he said, leaping back, "I'll lead you to some friends what's looking for you."

"That's right, run away and call it *leading*," I shouted.

But he had gone, taking the steps in three leaps.

"Mac, he means the loggers," cried Tess. "They've been here, drunk, for days."

I looked at her, a sight of hay-seeds and tears and hair, in a passion of fear running to the stairway, listening to the loft window, crying out, "What shall I do? Led is so mad with me."

"Let's clear out," I said, taking her hand and putting an arm about her, though I felt no interest in the touch of her now. "I'll take you across to your aunt's."

"No, not there; besides, you can't. Listen!"

We had got down to the lower floor and just outside the door were three of the river-men, with Led talking loudly to them. "They'll kill you," she sobbed, "and then Led'll let them get me." Her sobs choked her bosom and I had one clear view of what my folly had brought me into. We stopped and I said: "Get your breath, Tess. They're not so sober yet that we can't run for it."

"Oh, I can't!" she moaned. "They'd pull me away from you."

They had begun moving in our direction. "Quick, the

loft window!" and I took her by the arm, ran up the rickety stairs, brushed away the cobwebs, and climbed out on the window ledge. It was but a short distance down to the manure-pile. "Jump," I commanded. "You go first," she said, still shaking with sobs.

I jumped and then it took a precious minute for her to make up her mind, I dreading at every second the appearance of the loggers around the building, she trembling on the wet ledge. Finally, there was a stamping up the stairs and she leapt. We were scarcely out of the range of oaths when a burly head was stuck out at the window, the cry raised. Yet we had the lead of a large field before they were in organized pursuit.

Alone I could have distanced them in half a mile; but Tess had already had a succession of shocks and, though she was a woods girl, her driving power seemed paralyzed as in a dream. Despite my care of her she fell repeatedly, crying to herself. When I dared look I saw them in a lean file streaming after, Led running with the foremost. We plunged into thin woods.

"Leave me behind a tree and go on. They'll get you."

"Come, and don't talk," I ordered, pulling her across a fallen trunk.

She tried again, but they had halved the distance separating us, and we had a swampy piece to negotiate. It seemed beyond her powers.

"Oh, leave me!" she moaned. "I'm dead with my side."

"After getting you in this trouble? Likely!"

She was too heavy to be helped much. Even on me a dizziness was beginning to fall. Putting my hands in the pits of her arms, I got her through the swamp somehow and hoped that our tracks would be a little clouded. But we soon were in a worse tangle of briers.

"One more try, Tess, and we'll be nigh the river."

"They'll drown you there, and me, after."

But we made it, tearing through the briers and coming out

on the Chubb where it was n't so deep that we could n't wade in it, yet not so shallow that the going was n't slow.

"My side hurts awful, Mac. I can't go on."

"Just around the corner, Tess, and then we'll decide."

But the decision was forced on us, for she gripped my arm, pointing to a couple of men at the edge of the river ahead. They had n't seen us, being busy with washing sugar-kettles, it looked like.

"There, quick, get down in there. We'll hide there," I said, showing where a tussle of tree roots, undermined by high water, had sprung out a little from the bank and spread a covert. "That tangle 'll hide us."

The last scare had deprived her of the power of moving and I had to drag her. The water was waist-deep near the curve and bitterly cold, though I think that helped her to keep her senses. In fact, we thought little of that. Where the bank rose highest we crouched beneath the murk of roots and bushes and waited. We waited, teeth chattering, and what thoughts passed through Tess's mind I cannot guess, but sobs silently agitated her. In my mind thoughts were passing too, in the intervals that I was not all alive for the first sound of our pursuers, and they left a trail of bitterness behind them. I had taken on man's estate with a vengeance. For the disturbed sharpness of that broken kiss I was now paying in discomfort of body and misery of mind. And these looked like a mere preliminary to endless instalments of the same debt — provided the loggers should pass us by, which was unlikely. I dove into my submerged belt and undid my hunting-knife. It was my one weapon. A sob escaped her at the sight of it.

"Tess, will you forgive me?" I spoke into her ear.

A louder sob was her one reply.

The current numbed my legs. I glanced at the puckered mouth, the blue, drawn cheeks of the girl. Stripped of her warmth, what was *she* to have made me leave the cave and all the beautiful past? I wondered how I came to be such a

fool. A wandering damp air sucked through the roots, and we huddled close for warmth, but the touch of her was repulsive now. I would have plunged myself back into the most uncomfortable moment of my past life and called it bliss in preference.

"Listen," she whispered, chattering, her fingers clutching my shoulder until I thought they would meet through it.

A few rods down-stream I heard rough voices growing louder.

## CHAPTER VII

### ROMANCE

I COULD see little from the twist and tumble of the hemlock roots about me, but I could hear enough to know that there were several men, on our side of the river, and that they were quarreling with Hooker, who was trying on the unusual responsibilities of leader. They were evidently still well liquored and well chilled and one of them was pouring out some blasphemies on the chase.

"Cool your tongue!" cried Hooker. "They must have come this way."

"Ask Mac, there!" suggested another. I started so violently at the sound of my name that Tess wisely clapped her hand to my mouth. But the sugar-maker above us was the Mac intended, and a logger called over, "Hey, MacKenzie, seen anything of that whelp Anson MacIntyre with Tess Mitten?" They had n't seen us, for which I thanked God on the spot, and the loggers gathered together not far from the tree above us for a consultation. Soon all were in a violent passion, Led being keen to go on, yet afraid to go alone; the rest were tired of the chase and beginning to guy him on his luck with Tess.

"You're a bunch of quitters," said Led, fiercely. "You've drunk all the whisky Sol'd trust me for and now you go back on me. Just like you to turn rats and scuttle. River-men, river-rats, all the same breed. Come on just three minutes further, men! Did n't you see they was too winded to run far?"



Then came more argument, louder words, still louder oaths, topped by Hooker's anger, and all the while our teeth working up and down on one another until I thought the noise could n't help but draw them. We chattered like bats' young in a chimney.

"Do you suppose I'm going to let that—" and here he drew a profane portrait of me—"pull my girl from under my nose and him not bleed for it?" Led bawled, in an extremity of anger.

The loggers burst into a flow of coarse jibes that turned me red to the hairs on the neck that Tess should hear it. But she, shivering close to me, seemed to be moved by none of it, until Led mentioned that he'd fix it with her aunt so she would n't interfere, whereupon the girl fell into another silent spell of crying. The voices grew still louder, with Hooker's and another's, a deep, husky voice, taking the leading parts. This voice said, finally: "Come off that talk, Led. I'm going."

"Crawl, just like a dirty polecat." Hooker was mad-rash.

"Polecats is dangerous beasts," said the big voice, threateningly.

"And damned disagreeable to get disturbed up," added another logger.

"And they hate to be called polecats," said a third, with an oath. And then we heard the smash of a blow, cries, and more blows. We two cowering in our mud-mess of roots and water felt the earth break above us, heard the gravel clattering down into the water with the stamping of the feet and the fight, and all at once, from an intense quiet of grappling, rose a deep shout of satisfaction as the shadow of a falling body fell across the face of our hiding-place. There was a splash in the water that sent it into our necks and faces, and in a second there emerged, not a yard from us, the sprawly, sluicing, mad-unseeing dishevelment named Led Hooker. Had he been less blind with his rage, less deaf with water

in his ears, he must have heard the twin gasp from us refugees. He strode splashily on, waist-deep.

Above us broke out a joyous tumult of hoarse laughter from the polecats as they withdrew along the bank in the direction of the village and more drink. Hooker, vibrant with rage, and rapid with reaction from his icy bath, scrambled up the bank, not three yards from us, slipping twice in his furious hurry to be after them, and laughter came to our lips for the first time that day as he disappeared.

Even after we had pulled ourselves stiffly out, had beat our limbs into some usefulness, and had wandered carefully wide of any scrutiny of near-by lurkers, an occasional giggle would rise in the throat and crack our blue cheeks. Cold, hungry, homeless, burdened with a girl with eyes that had forgot their boldness, a mouth that had lost its warmth, and pledged as food-carrier to a friend hours' travel away, I still could not feel the world utterly cheerless so long as I could remember the sight of that infuriated figure scrambling on all dripping fours up the slippery bank. I set off at a savage pace toward the distant road, with Tess dragging after.

There was but one sensible course: to make as direct a line as possible to the road for Saranac Lake village, some nine miles away. Soon a damp, unseasonable snow began to fall and we filed on, fatigue stopping all talk, luckily, and even blurring thought. My temper cried out against the responsibilities that unrolled before me, and my head swam at the thought of the weariness and trouble that trailed ahead into the undivulging distance. The predicament of Touch weighed on me more with every mile that added to our separation. But I dared not cry out against these things, for fear it would scratch Tess's temper, which was now worn very tender. Indeed, we did come to a pass of words from weariness and apprehension that near broke the back of the slender plan I was beginning to form. For when we had stepped out on that narrow winding wood road down whose weary length

we had yet to trundle before we reached Saranac Lake, the mockery of our ill-paired loneliness came crushingly upon us and each felt the other scarcely to be endured.

"And now, Mac," she said, "I think you might tell me what you're going to do with me. I think I've been very patient."

"Patient!" I exploded. "You patient!"

"You've been patient, too," she said with lip trembling; but this time I cared nothing for the danger-signal.

"Ain't it like a girl!" I called out to the trees in a fit of anger.

"Ain't it just like a girl to trapse a man over mountain and mountain, to lay him in the mud and walk on him, and then at the end of it all say *she's* been very patient!" Tess stared at me in wonder, but I could not stop. "Oh, yes, patient! Next she'll be saying I'm very *selfish* to take her time. Patient!" She had stopped at the roadside, pale, wretched.

"I've never failed for friends, Mac, one kind or another. You can go back to yourn. You've seen me to the road. You can leave me now."

My head seemed to turn dark inside with trouble and weariness. But her distress and sudden calmness in it brought me back to my real self and I said, "You know that I can't, Tess."

"Yes, you can. Give me the loan of a little money and I'll walk to Saranac Lake and get a job. You can go back to Mr. Touch."

"I can't leave you. I've got to see you safe, since 't was I who made this mess. I'm going to work for you, Tess, till I get it fixed up with your aunt, and she takes you back."

"I'm never going back, Mac. There was other things. You've got no call to do further."

A sudden temptation came on me. Why not take her at her word? To admit that I owed her was to plunge myself

into an endless future. And yet as I stood there on the road curve, with the balsams sending their spires into the gray and lazy snow, and saw her tired glance shrink, what could I do otherwise? How could I ever look at myself in a wood pool and think, "Do you call yourself a man, Anson MacIntyre?" if I threw her from me as a man flings off a dirty shirt?

"Tess," I said quickly, "I'm seeing you out of this scrape and there's no more words on that. The only question is how."

"I pointed you out how," she said, still unconvinced. "But if you're *afraid*, Anson MacIntyre, to give me the loan of that little money, why then I can go without." And she started slowly down the road.

"Look, Tess; see," I said, running beside her, and turning out my pockets. "There's not a cent in 'em, Tess, or I'd give it you."

This discovery daunted her humor, I think, but she kept proudly on, tossing back the words: "They say borrowing money from *friends* breaks up the *friendship*, and I'd hate to have *ours* broken." But I had control of my temper now and pity for her clutched me by the throat. She began running, but in a step I'd caught her, crying, "I don't blame you for mistrusting me, girl; but won't you quit and make up?"

I had her, so forlorn, quivering but not crying now, folded to me, and I rejoiced that my well-muscled arms could comfort her though my heart lay cold.

"You can trust me for the right thing from now on, Tess," I said. "There's no use in living if you can't live solid as you go."

So, shaking silently like a wild thing with her sobbing that grew quieter and less, she held tight to me; nor did I dare to release her for fear it would hurt her feelings. We must have made a queer picture, in the midst of that road and the big flakes falling on us, but my mind was busy saying to it-

self: "So this is romance!" "So *now* I'm a man." I could have laughed at the bitterness of it as the minutes passed. "Ay, romance," almost moved on my lips as all my thoughts on it went prancing through my head and mixing with my wondering as to how soon I could release her decently.

The question was solved by a merry crack of a whip and a pleasant-sounding laugh. A long wagon with two on the front seat had rounded the curve. We jumped apart, being a little too worn with our cares to add another as to whether they saw us or not. The horses were stepping energetically toward us.

"Going Saranac way?" invited the whip-cracker, a round-cheeked man with a pleasant-humored smile and old enough to have a grown-up daughter, the girl who was sitting beside him.

We climbed up behind the two and sat on a pile of empty potato-bags, cuddling close, for the cold penetrated our unfed dampness with a discomfort that would have made a dog whine. I tried with an arm to make up for Tess's lack of clothes, and it is amazing how much heartening a single hug can convey. Tess, I thought, seemed almost ready to smile at me when we were settled behind their backs, though doubtless the smile was the female anxiety to show off. Anyway, we were both relieved and the driver kept talking and chuckling, with sometimes an echo of his chuckle from the shoulders of his daughter, whose face I had not seen. The horses, being well fed and out-steppers, put the road behind them.

"That's right," said the driver, looking around at us; "sweetheart it as close as you've a mind to. Me and Hallie won't look," though he was scarcely as good as his word, for he turned and winked jovially at me. I suddenly became mightily anxious that this Hallie of his, with her happy laugh and proud-held head, should not think I was too closely concerned with Tess. I must have flushed up a bit,

and I made some silly remark about Tess's being my sister. At that the farmer, who was bent on having his joke out, said: "Tush, tush, my boy! Your *sister*, did you say? And standing so affectionate as when we seen you? I'm learning about sisters, Hallie. Now, my girl here and yours might have been sisters. See, their hair was both wound off'n the same straw-stack." And putting back an arm he lifted up a tress or two of hers where it fell, a glorious shadowy gold.

"Quit, Dad!" said Hallie, in a voice as rounded and golden as the hair. He laughed and clucked to the horses. "Off'n the same straw-stack, while yours, my boy, is that dark. Sister? Well it don't appear just probable." And he laughed again, but such a laugh as no one could have minded.

"Dad, do quit, now!" said Hallie, still keeping her face undisclosed. "They may not like teasing as much as you do."

A warmth spread through me at the sound of her taking my part. Hers was a voice through which played a light-heartedness, wed to a sweet sincerity, that I'd never heard before. It was as if the sun was shining at last; shining, what's more, through new birch leaves. I mean it had that particular light quality. "Dad, do quit, now!" was the most beautiful speech that I'd ever heard.

"You see," he said, giving a happy chuckle, "you just see how a man is ordered around by his womankind. Perhaps, young fellow, you've found it the same in your—in your—" Hallie had clipped his word with a swift hand over her dad's mouth, through which trickled, however, the syllable "sis," followed by a suppressed sputter.

They had it out between them, the girl as active at the game as a kitten, her laughter so joyous and untroubled that it almost hurt. Indeed, the picture of homefulness they acted out set up an ache in my heart. I immediately set off on a long dream in which my arm, instead of holding the drooping flabbiness of the she-thing beside me, would be

pressing her to me, closer and closer, until she would be saying, "Mac, quit now; now do quit it, Mac," in that delicious sun-shot voice.

But I woke from the dream with the jolting of the wagon, still playing the gallant to Tess, still having to watch that couple on the front seat in a nauseating envy. The idea of Tess's hair and hers being alike! As well lay some yellow fuzz alongside plaited sunlight and call it the same thing; you could n't be unfairer.

"Well, it's lucky you are brother and sister," he said, and like a fool I asked why.

"Why, her mother need n't mind if you do get home a little late." Again I asked why. "We turn in pretty soon. Our place is a good three mile out of Saranac and Hallie here'd like to give you something to warm up on before you hoof it the rest of the way. Would n't you, Hallie?" Hallie assented, and if it had not been for Tess I could even have postponed my duties to Touch in accepting. But Tess! I had a sudden huge desire to hustle her out of Hallie's way. What if something should come out to prove she was n't my sister! Before I thought another instant my tongue had said, "But Ma does want us early."

"Shucks! it ain't dusk yet."

"But she —"

"Dad, do leave him alone if he has to hurry! His sister —"

Mr. Brewster (for that was the name he gave us) broke into a cascade of chuckles. "I like that! I like that! Ye've even fooled Hallie, here. Poor blind Hal! Fooled me, too. Listen, Hallie; I'll prove they is brother and sister. First, she's his sister because she don't bother to contradict him. No good sister contradicts. Second, he's her brother because we seen 'em so loving in the road. None but relatives could be so loving as that. Third,—do you want a third —"

"My, see how hard it's snowing!" said Miss Hallie. I

could have knelt and prayed to her for that interruption. But it did not stop her jovial father.

"Third, a brother and sister is known by their kisses — that they don't give. I ain't heard a one, though this wagon do make a terrible racket."

"Dad," ordered Hallie, severely, "will you be quiet or will I have to punish you?"

Whatever her methods of discipline were, they were sufficient for that amiable man, and he subsided for several minutes, while the squalls fell in vagaries of fast or slow, and my mood sang a dull song on the one tune I knew, *Alas, poor me!* Saddled with a wench; penniless; responsible for getting food to a cave-dweller before he should eat his fingers off; cold, hungry, with no friends except the new ones in front of me to whom I would not have unburdened my woes for a three-storied house; hungry, cold, penniless, saddled with a wench. Thus ran my thoughts in a circle, if you can call them thoughts, being like a lament for the dead (which same was I), a lament with variations, funeral time, and in a most afflicting minor.

The screaming of the brakes upon the last hill, however, only strengthened me in one particular. I would run no risk of having Tess and Hallie together and where the Brewsters turned to go up their lane I made the example of leaping out, Tess following sullenly.

"I don't know how to make a fair return for this lift," I said.

"Stow such talk," he interrupted; "the two of you've been a godsend to Hallie and me. We live lonely enough in that big house and you've done us the favor of supplying talk for half an evening. Now, Hallie here, she's real interested in —"

Whatever he was about to say was smothered by her swift hand. I had edged around a little in front and saw her face for the first time. The word to convey its appearance I should



say was happiness. She seemed so full of health, so laughter-like, her eyes with their glance so wholesome and care-free that as lightning flashes from the night there clove through me the flame-like desire to be known of such a one, to have her know me.

Words are slow things to reveal that swift longing that leapt unloosed within me. I dropped my stare, she waved her hand, and it was over — was our first meeting. But something was left a-whirl within me. I did not budge as they drove on, because my chiefer self was dreaming still down and down the vista of those frank and laughing eyes.

## CHAPTER VIII

### I OUT, BUT DESTINY DEALS

**Y**OU look as if you'd forgotten something," said Tess, with an ugly laugh that shattered my romance into a thousand realities.

"You're damned right," I said, a wave of resentment at the thought of having to leave Hallie to go with her coming over me. "But I thank you for reminding me. Come on."

"I don't see why you're so sour," she said whiningly. "It's your fault that we're not in there eating supper with them now."

"*My* fault!" I began, my voice sharpened with anger. "Mine!"

Perhaps I need n't have been so harsh, but there are last straws and I think I would have hit the girl if I had n't forced myself into a wicked stride that kept her panting at my heels. But she soon made up for it by dawdling along, reproaching me in that whine that only a tired woman can command, repeating that I should have taken the chance to get rested, fed; arguing with herself when I would no longer answer, and moaning out that I had no pity on her. As, indeed, I had not.

At last, when we came within half a mile of the village, she refused to budge farther.

"You're so clever at losing chances to eat, suppose you go on now and find one. I can't go further till I've rested."

"And I can't leave you here alone and the night coming."

"I'm as safe here as with you," she said, giving that ugly laugh again.

"That's not fair, Tess," I began, and then left off. I was learning something about women, after all, and I thought of Touch with a grim smile.

"You'll freeze, Tess-girl," I coaxed. "Walk on slow. I'll hustle and pick out some place, maybe get a wagon."

"I'll do as I please," was her helpful response as I started off, my courage quite numb in the perspective of all that still lay ahead. At last I came down by the river and saw three or four dim lights through the thinning squall,—the village of Saranac Lake. The wind ate its way through my clothes and my skin. "Gee! but it'll be cold in that pass to-night!" I said, and wondered whether I had left enough firewood for Touch. Never had I thought that I'd be gone so long. As I jogged I wondered, too, whether I could safely put Tess in at the village inn, providing they had one. A dark blot of a house at my right hand arrested me, and I slowed into a walk, wondering if I could find help in it.

There was a board walk, through a couple of whose rotten boards I broke on my way, to the front door. The door itself was battered and unpainted. No lights came from any of the windows except one, partly covered with a board, from the cracks of which the rays of a weak illumination ventured out. The windows rattled in a gust as I neared it, and I halted, a creepy sensation coming over me. "No help there," I thought, and turned, setting into a jog again, the last I heard being a tin flapping in the wind, which seemed to be trying at all the shingles for entrance into that dreary place. A sinister feeling is your compound of hunger, cold, loneliness, and love left behind, and when I had got half-way on I stopped short. I could not go farther and leave Tess alone. So, in this irresolute mood I turned again, resolved to make her accompany me or spend the night with me in the woods.

All the way back I hoped to meet her, and ran softly on the new, thin snow, but to my surprise and indignation she

was to be met with neither on the road nor at the place where we had parted. And now I went quite wild with fatigue and anger at her and the folly of my day's work, running around, calling her, and even hunting back a little in the woods, for fear that she had actually crawled back in them to freeze. I kept this up five minutes, I suppose, before I came to my senses. "Look here, Anson MacIntyre, pull yourself together. You're no fool." And down I sat on a white log, putting my head in my hands and praying a least mite, I think, to that God who was so very real to me, who stood back of the great blue, yet with His ear down to my lips whenever I was in trouble. And when I looked up, the simple idea of looking for her tracks came to me so clear that I had to laugh aloud.

I found that she must have crept after me, for she'd put her feet in my footmarks—no wonder I hadn't noticed them!—and had walked up to that very house that I'd inspected, and not only up but *in*.

I stood still a minute and all the Fates must have held their breath; for in that minute I decided how good a man I was to be.

"Is it your fault that she's in there?" said my temptation to me. "Is it playing the man to leave her yet?" said my conscience. This time conscience had food and warmth on its side, and won; and I knocked doubtfully on the darkened house. I heard a chair pushed back, a snicker which sounded like Tess's, and the door creaked open an inch.

"Who's there?" asked a woman, looming tall and thin against the light.

"Anson MacIntyre of Placid," I said, not too resolutely.

"I've been waiting you," said she, in a voice that set me trembling strangely, "these six years."

She stepped aside to let me enter and I saw, smaller than I remembered, older-looking than she ought to have been, but

with hair coal-black and face as proud, my Ma. I felt as if a ghost had stepped from that pine-tree where I used to play, in our dooryard.

"Hold the lamp, girl, and let's have the light on him. Let's look at my little 'Son."

Tess held the lamp. I felt as if those six years were all crowding up into my throat, eager to speak, yet unable. Instincts tangled within me and held me motionless, when I should have liked to run to her as a child does on a home-coming. But I did not.

"So it's 'Son,'" she repeated; then, "Bill all over again, only handsomer." I felt the warmth of the room and her words flush me. "Bill never could blush like that." She laughed a laugh of memories. "Bill all over again, except the eyes. Look at me, 'Son. Yes, they're not Bill's eyes, they're better eyes. What's he doing with you?" She turned as a colt wheels, on poor Tess, who was scared into a fit of stammers which brought me to the use of a tongue.

"She's all right, Ma. But we'd like something to eat before we talk much."

The room was small but fixed up with knickknacks just as I might have known Ma'd have it — a cozy corner even if the whole outside was going to perdition. That's a woman's way. And while Tess dried her hair in front of the stove Ma lifted the steaming potatoes off the top and set them on the table, just as I remembered her those years ago, and the two of them were soon babbling, at the which I wondered, when I, who was her son, could only look and feel a silly bashfulness.

With our sitting down came her first reference to home.

"Thar's just taters and tea, like the old days, 'Son," she said.

"Raw potatoes and no tea at all'd go fine with us, I guess," said I, and within a few minutes Tess was telling all about the day.

I must say it is a matter for wonderment how women, par-

ticularly two, can warm up any situation and make something tasty of it. While my knife and saucer were making time, and while my eyes were trailing the whole place for signs of the man that had run off with Ma, those two managed to keep an overflow of talk going and even had me dragged into the conversation, though all the while those absent would come before my vision — Touch waiting in the lonely cave; Hallie, whose look would have sharpened to a tremulous dagger if she'd known how weak I had been but that very morning; my father, lying unshaven in that ghastly dawn. And all the while the something that had held me from Ma's arms strengthened in the passing of time: there was a gulf fixed between her nature and mine.

"Well, Tess," I said while the three of us were washing up, "as I must be moving, we better make out a plan about you."

"Tess'll stay with me," said Ma, looking at me through lowered lids, a curious cold glint in her eyes — the look a March day has when it loses its sun of a sudden and changes in an instant to cold fall.

"And I'll pay her keep," I said, "till I come back, which'll be as soon as I get Touch to walking."

"Sure," said Ma, "since I'm not so crying rich that I'm jumping to adopt young leddies. What have you got with you?"

"Not a cent, Ma."

"Leave off the 'Ma' while we're talking business," she said. "It minds me too much of your Pop. Put a little whine in your voice and I could suspect he'd sent you to borrow money."

The old irritation that had been dead so many years pricked into life within me and I began in the old way standing up for my Pop. But as the cords stood out on her hands, wringing out the dish-rag, I felt a new pity for her, too.

"I can work it off easy, soon as I'm free."

"We charge fifty cents a day at this hotel," she said, and in the toss of her head I caught the old nature unchanged by the years between.

"It's slavery to say it," I said, troubled, for no young fellow could earn that much and his keep besides, in those times.

"We all come to slavery sooner or later," she said listlessly. "You'll have to take that or take her, for I finished doing charity when I finished with supporting your Pop."

The extra clatter with which she set the dishes down meant, "So there!" and what with weariness and disappointment I felt my temper wearing. Hers also was on the up grade and she went on: "I've been figuring you out, 'Son, and I guess after all you're your Pop's boy. It's his kind of a trick to leave the girl to me, and skip. I'm wondering now whether he sent you here." Red spots shone in her cheeks.

"I'm not even living with him now," I said sullenly.

"But you've lived with him long enough to catch his *exquisite* manners. Lord! don't I remember how polished they was! I got one of the scars on my back yet."

"You're thinkin' o' the wrong man," I cried angrily. "Pop, soused or sober, never hit a woman yet."

"Oh! Really!" she mocked to anger me still more, and then her voice broke and she said, "You might've kissed me when you come in, 'Son." She gave me one look I'll never forget—a mother's look that filled my heart with tears, so pitiful, so hungry, lighting those dark eyes her Maker had intended to be always softly beautiful. I would have given my right hand to master that something in me that held me back. But while I was standing there a knock sounded on the door, the look died in her eyes, and I was left with Tess as she went to open it.

"Oh, promise her anything, Mac!" begged the girl. "I can't go out again. Say you'll promise."

"All right, I will," I said, desperate, half my mind following the woman, my mother (lost a while, and found, still lost), half hearing the brute gutturals of a man's voice, the words being inarticulate except that I distinguished once an oath and her sharp voice promising, "To-morrow night."

When she came back she was bled of all sweetness, and said with a harsh laugh: "Well, I suppose you're a cheap sport and 'll go looking for bargains further?"

"I'm sorry, Ma, I said that, about the — the thing you said."

"I'll forget it. We women forget lots. But we like our money in advance when we know you men. Oh! It's fair words and then an awful frost when it comes to paying. I can't trust you, 'Son."

"Well, I'm not a walking money-bag. But I'll promise you on the Bible."

"The Bible! That for it!" and she snapped her thin fingers, going off into a laugh that cut worse than sleet. "Promises! Huh! You're your dear innocent Pop all over again, 'Son. Look out or some night I'll be bedding with you by mistake," and she shot a curious look at Tess. "Promises! Well, 'Son, what'll you promise me?"

"That I'll pay half a dollar a day for Tess as long as she stays with you, if you'll just keep her safe."

"I'll keep her safe," said she, dryly. "Anything else? Like to borrow a week's rations for your friend, or a fur overcoat?"

She was laughing now, having discerned, I suppose, that there was really nothing to be got from me.

With her agreement, hard as it was for me, I felt a burden roll from my shoulders, with the same relief that a hunter sets down his pack at the end of a long trail. The road had turned, and though I had a tedious dark way ahead of me before I could lie down, yet the first fruits of my folly



had been disposed of. I tightened up my belt, cut some bread for my pocket, and bade them good-by.

"Good-by, 'Son," said my mother and she stood half in the doorway as I passed. But it was not in my mortal strength to kiss her, even then. It was no question of forgiveness to be answered "yes" or "no." It was deeper than that and I could only thank her as I would another. The door slammed none too soon, for there was a dampness in my eyes; and even as I moved away I saw a sight that told me more of mothers: for through the cracked pane there showed a woman with raven hair, flung upon her elbows in a bitterness of weeping, with Tess, standing in astonishment, helpless, looking on.

## CHAPTER IX

### END OF A DAY'S WORK

**M**Y legs soon set themselves to a dog-pace, carrying me away from the somber house and into the soft lanes and levels of my long journey back to Touch. The ribbon of soft roadway curved between forests of sober spruce, snow-flowered. On each hand a pinnacled sky-line ran dark against faint ghosts of northern fires haunting the upper skies. All was eerie and unembodied and I ran, tirelessly at first, buoyed by the white fire in the air and the joy within me. Oh! youth is fortunate when its follies are of the sort that can be paid at once and be not written into nature's ledger for a later settlement. I owed Tess for a lost home but not for more, and I would pay. My footfalls gladly echoed that sentiment. I would pay her, pay the woman that kept her, pay Pop for his care, pay Led, pay Touch, everybody; and then I should be free to go to Hallie, clean of heart and hand. And almost while I was thinking it I passed the lane that led up to the Brewsters' house. I stopped. There were no lights visible; for farmer folk retire early. Somewhere in that dark bulk across the white of fields she was, perhaps, thinking of her day and the fellow they had given a lift. Now I must not stop longer. But some day I should be coming back. Exultation at the thought leapt upon the throat of the long task intervening and shook it until it seemed short and easy.

"Good night, Hallie," I said aloud as I resumed my dog-trot.

The evening aged, the clouds melted across dim horizons,

and the aurora withdrew into its spirit mansions, leaving the skies to the soft multitudes of vernal stars. I neared Placid and as the road mounted a fatigue began to creep up my legs. I now walked up the hills. Around my brain revolved the circle of incidents of that interminable day. Nearly twenty-four hours had crawled across the sky since I had crept from beside Touch to seek a cessation of infancy, and I had almost played the man, indeed. It was true then, that as you seek you shall find, but how differently from your imaginings! In half an hour I should reach my home and my cache of food, but even that would leave an unthinkable distance yet to be stepped out, foot reaching ahead of foot, minute adding itself to minute, before I could clamber up that ledge and surprise Touch with "Here you are, fellow — lots of food." I imagined that he would say, "God, Mac, but you're a good kind to have brought it in to-night!" or "You're a friend that is a friend! Did you find your girl?" Then I'd surprise him by describing the real girl I had found.

There is a strength in a superior scorn, and when I passed Led's home I rejoiced in my advantage. I was in love. He could have his Tess; I was in love. For the honor that was friendship I was achieving a journey that was great; for the fulfillment that is love I would achieve much more. And with this spur set to my heart I kept the pace, shouldered my pack, turned my weary thighs to their alternate motions, and flung one foot before the other while Orion fell to rest. I could think no more. The numbness that had long been seeping up my limbs had reached the head. Behind me, I knew, stretched a great blank of country covered. Before me lay a lessening range of task that ended in great peace.

I left the clearing and plunged into that last long climb. Up, I went, and on. Once I tried bathing my face in a little brook. But it was so hard to get back into my stride that I dared not stop again. Dawn must have come, because the hueless wood resolved into its somber show of greens and

I swam on through seas of weariness. On — on — on — a turn here, a root there, a stub of the toe, a tumble, a dimness of distress. The moss was cool, the air down little ravines cool, and I longed to lie down if only for a moment in the shadowed lap of the forest and let the soft fingers of nature lift the intolerable weight of another day from my tired lids.

Falls came oftener, and sometimes my eyes would close on the ground. Sometimes before I knew I was on the ground a blanket of sleep would rush over me and I would have to struggle to throw it off. But on I went, falling, and lying, and rising, and at last — I do not know how — I came to the bottom of the ledge where the cave was. I called out and heard a remote solicitous voice. I thought I could not call loud enough and a fear rushed over me, and all became as remote as in a dream, nor would my eyes keep open till I was sure. But I felt a hand beneath my arm, I felt the dead-weight of the pack lifted from my back, and somehow — ask me not whence — came a last desperate energy and I let myself be guided by that voice and hand until, with his muttering sounding distant in my ear, I fell on the balsam softness.

There are three things of infinite blessing to a man wearying for sleep, thirsting for love, or sickening for death, and they are all — surrender. I felt my body pushing on into a meaningless soft mist — and willed no more. .

Ed told me that I slept two days, or almost, for the sun was glistening on the balsams and the lazy rays of afternoon were looking inquisitively into our cave when I opened my eyes. The brook whimpered from below and whispered of its fancy to lie still. Some bird peeped drowsily that sleep was good, and the wind seeping from the south through the murmurous trees acquiesced in my mood of perpetual slumber. "Why," thought I, "should I ever want to move again?" and

then a stir of "Hallie," in my brain shot like a shaft of sunrise across a gulf and I opened my eyes to find him, my pal Touch, kneeling beside me, looking intently at me, a relieved smile shining in his eyes — eyes that seemed more than ever so clear as to be soulless.

"God, Mac, you make me easy by opening up!" The smile broadened over his features. "Not that I minded you sleeping day after day, but I hate a dead man lying about camp."

My thoughts were still tongue-tied.

"Oh, boy! but it's been lonely without you!" He studied me closely, with those whimsical devils of his humor peeking out his eyes. "Lonely!" he went on. "Lonely's not the word. Unhealthy! I don't see how you stand these woods, kid. They give me the creeps, the crawls. If I had n't been short a leg you'd 've never found me here. I was getting less and less myself, getting Touchless. Why, man, I'm a mere cipher clothed in flesh,— a mere naked cipher, and was getting nakeder every hour till you come. I'd 've been a stark, raving zero in another day of this, talkin' to the bushes and callin' 'lovey-dovey' to the trees."

It gave me satisfaction that he had missed me, but I was troubled a little that he did not like the woods.

"I've got to have some one around, Mac, so don't you go off again, you old double-faced woman-eater."

"Double-faced woman-eater!" I repeated, comfortable in my new equality with him.

"That's you, kid, and double-faced don't half say it. First you let on to me that you're so innocent that you've never even looked 'em in the leg. And then you run off and spend a couple of nights with them. Is that fair to your bachelor friend, here? Come on now, tell your uncle all about it."

He sat down beside me in a mock serious mood, cut in profile against the fading light, gay, profanely careless, joyful at my return, as different from the stolid natives I knew as is mica from granite.

"Oh, you need n't let on there's nothing to tell!" as I lay wondering what to say. "You've been talking in your sleep, Mac, my dandy, and I've been fed on all their names. First it's Hallie and then Tess and then Hallie again. Haven't I got them correct?"

I had to laugh at him, so eager, so boyish. Now it seemed that I was the sober, experienced man.

"Come on, kid," he coaxed. "Here's me living in a bachelor way up in a God-forsaken, girl-forsaken mountain pass and you down to the city wrecking up the women worse than a bull in a china factory. You owe me the details, Mac. What'd you say and what'd she say and who'd you tackle first and how'd you come to switch and which is the one you're going to leave for me when we both go down together? Gosh! It's been nigh three days since I had one of them little dears in my arms and I've forgot 'most what they're like in this he-wilderness. Say, Mac, did you ever hear a tree talk? Well, I did last night. But that's off the topic. Who was your first, dandy — Tess or Hallie?"

"Don't, Ed," was the first word that escaped me. His chatter jangled with that waking thought I'd had. "Don't just now, Ed. I'm — I'm hungry. It's all been different, anyway."

He stared at me, evidently muddled as to my meaning.

"I'm going to get some grub," I said, beginning to rise.

"You lie still and swallow what I've made," he said, putting a strong hand on my obedient shoulder. "I'm something of a wild and primitive cook, but that's in keeping with this disordered wilderness, so swallow." And so I swallowed, with as much gaiety as the stuff would allow me to assume, the curious gruel which he had compounded from my pack. And when I had finished it he laughed. "Mac," he said, "you're a queer duck, but you're brave to eat that, with such a swift affectionate tongue. Will you lap up some more? There's gallons." I declined.

"And I don't blame you. But now tell me, kid, what did you mean by it was *different*?"

"Well, just different from what you think," I could only repeat, helpless before his gaze, and coloring.

"Then may the Lord damn me!" was his explosive comment. "If you don't beat me! Was they both just *sisters* to you?"

"One is going to be my wife some day, Ed," I said, looking him full-square in the face.

"That is different," he said. "Which?"

Seizing my chance, I began to pour out my accumulated expectations of happiness. For if there is anything a lover craves, next to his beloved, it is a confidant, and I must say for Ed, that he listened with unconquerable if stolid patience. In the intervals he'd put more sticks upon the fire, but he always came back to listen some more. Once he interrupted with, "I don't see why you ever came back up here, Mac."

"You can't doubt why," I said.

"If the places had been in reverse—" He hesitated.

"You'd have done just the same," I assured him.

"I wish you knew me, Mac," he said softly, as if the cry came from his inmost and best self. "I'm the original weak reed, and broke in the wrong places, at that." Somehow it hurt me to see the gay superior Ed even frosted with distrust of his own self. Seriousness did not become him.

"I'll trust you," I said, "and there's my hand on it."

"You're a good kid," he replied, himself again.

We were silent a while, each dealing with his own long thoughts, while the sparks that hived in the fire grew restless and flew away in little swarms. Then out of the twilight came Touch's laugh, still tinged with reverie, and he said:

"There's just two mysteries you'd ought to clear up for me, Mac."

"Well?"

"The first is what gave you the guts to lug that food to me?"

"That's easy," I said. "What's the second?"

He paused, then said almost reverently: "There's a reason for everything, I guess, except for being in love with just one woman."

"You don't need a reason for that," I said. "Just wait till you see mine."

"I don't want to see her," was his strange reply. And had I, who thought myself so adequately experienced, really been, I should have read the future from his words. As it was, being comfortably wrapped in the robes of love and friendship, I turned over and resumed my slumbers, thrice happier than I had ever been before.



## CHAPTER X

ED — RIGHT SIDE UP

**F**OR the next few days Touch and I lived cheek by jowl in the cave and made a team of such opposite qualities that we played or worked admirably together. In practical matters he yielded to my way of doing things, both because of my experience and his masterly laziness, which brooked no exertion that could be avoided. In other matters, conversation, and swift change of mood, he led, I following with a chuckle and an easy habit of admiration, for he could carry off any remark, any view, with another gayer and more absurd to top it. So, choosing to ignore our final differences as fellow-campers must, we maintained the poise of our tempers with quite unusual success.

But it was because we were unfit to travel rather than because he liked it that Touch consented to tarrying in my paradise. I remember his gibe in reply to my exclamation of content, one evening around the friendly fire. I'd said, "With a rifle and a few pounds of flour I could live here forever."

"Live here forever!" he repeated. "That's not the point. The point is how soon you could decently die. They say a man can't kill himself and keep his self-respect, Mac. But if I was sentenced to stay here I guess I'd have to say good-by to the self-respect."

I yawned at him. "Will you bite the hand that feeds you?"

"Don't forget that I've had a whole day more of this scenery than you, kid."

"A day the luckier."

"Do you really think so? Is it possible that a fellow with a head and furnishings likes it! It reminds me too much of a bit of farming I did once. Too much nature's what keeps me from being a farmer; though farming has one point in its favor."

He paused for me to ask him what that was. I asked.

"Why, because the fields is froze up eight months of the year and you can't do it."

"What are you going to do when you get out of this awful place?" I asked, heaving a sigh at the very thought of leaving.

"Do? Damned if I know! The first thing that walks up to my fancy and starts to tickle it, I guess. What are you?"

I had been cherishing a plan for a while which I wanted to spring on him, but was afraid that I'd be laughed at or turned down. I wanted to see if he had a serious spot in him.

"Ed," I said, "don't you suppose every fellow was cut out for something?"

"No."

"Well, don't you suppose a fellow can cut himself out for anything?"

"Why should he?"

He seemed to have gone listless, and something in me, some ingredient of my affection for him, seemed in danger of stalling. My life was aimless enough, but his was meaningless.

"That used to be the way I felt," I said, "when roaming these woods and pulling trout and making sugar and hunting bees was good enough for me. They're still good, but they're not enough, and it hurts. There's something inside of me keeps turning over, restless, as if it'd had enough sleep. But I don't know what it is."

"Too many flapjacks," said Ed, but I for once ignored him,

"I wish it'd wake up, whatever it is."

"That little restless thing was left out of me, thank God," said Ed.

"When I know what it is I'll be happy. I'll know what to do, and I'll do it."

"And become rich and famous and own a cabin and a farm and a wife and help make up the tax-list. Oh, Mac!"

His banter trailed off into a disconsolate silence. "Working don't strike me particularly rosy," he continued, glumly, "but I can see now it pays to think life out. It pays to think it out to the very end of the string, or else you get caught in events just like me. Events is just like one of your dog-goned steel traps, Mac. Events has teeth and they'll catch you unless you set 'em to catch something else. They're lively things, events. Mostly I get caught in my own events and that's a poor thing."

I rejoiced. He could be serious a moment, for now he was undoubtedly serious. I said: "While we're curing from being caught in our last event we might think it out to the end of the string. There's a lot of thinking time going to waste out here."

"We might at that," he assented, very gloomily, settling into an attitude of dismal thought.

So completely had his high spirits left him that I had to laugh outright. "Ed, Ed," I cried, "stop thinking! It's killing you; and, besides, I've thought it all out for you. Why don't you and me go into something together? We could farm it or trap it or anything, so we did it together."

He brightened like a sun-flash on a mirror, which was his very nature—any mood so that it differed from the one before.

"I'll do it with you!" he exclaimed, slapping his leg. "I'll do it with you! We'll be partners. Partners! MacIntyre and Touch, or Touch and MacIntyre. Which do you like best?"

"Not much diff, just so we stick to it and to each other."

"Oh, we'll stick, all right! Touch and MacIntyre, the Famous Duplex Brothers in their Famous Duplicated Donkey Business. Hooray!" He gave a whoop that echoed back a minute later from the original granite MacIntyre.

"You must have change, must n't you, Ed?" I was a little worried at his ardor.

"No, by Gad! I can be as steady as a sun-dial."

"Steady as a disordered clock," I retorted. "Settle down and let me tell you what I've thought out."

"Spit it out," he said. "I'll be as serious as a grindstone."

And he was, until I came to discussing the possibilities of Saranac Lake for our base of operations, as we were to be trappers.

"Can't it be Malone?" he asked a bit wistfully. "I know a hummer in Malone." His well-proportioned face shone with a new interest as he thought of the "hummer"—she was a blonde of infinite vivacity, I gleaned—and there passed through my mind a doubt as to the quality and quantity of work I might be able to exact from my partner. But I shoved the doubt aside, for that brand of friendship (I thought) is beneath scorn that expects perfection. On the whole he listened with a fairly graceful indifference while I wove the strands of our partnership idea into a pretty fabric of success.

For a couple of days longer we kept close to headquarters while a cold rain fell, arguing, joking, and ever advancing with our plans; and then, when the sun plied the slopes with its increasing warmth, an incident befell which cemented the partnership idea with a presentation of wealthy hopes.

We had been exploring southward through the pass and had come late in the afternoon on such a colony of bees as I had never thought possible. It extended for rods through the narrowest part of the pass, occupying all the ravine-bottom, the winged workmen using not only an ancient hollow pine

(which had been, probably, the parent hive) but also wall crevices and the ground holes for their storerooms. Shafts of sunlight fell lazily aslant the winding way, illumining great fallen boulders old with lichen, and now and then a bee would gleam golden as he fled the rays. The season of their activity was only begun and we trod stealthily by the openings where the rocks had been stained with innumerable alightings of the pollen-bearers, able to look down into holes that led away to untold depths of sweetness.

In the olden days, so my father had often told me, great swarms of wild bees had frequented the deepest wilderness, transmuting the vast stores of pollen from the natural meadows into a dark sweetness that dripped slowly from the giant firs and was ravaged by the wandering bear. But with the first onslaught of the loggers the swarms had diminished and withdrawn. Many a time he and I had come on small colonies in trees, and my most ecstatic memories are of those golden days of autumn when the first frosts had silenced the perpetual hum and he and I would coax from them our winter sweets with rope and ax. I had even seen rock colonies, but never anything like this vast underground store, this compound of a hundred hives. It was a novelty and staring fascination to me.

"It scares me. Let's go back," said Touch, pausing when we were in the midst of the honeyed waste. "It's scary walking. Suppose your foot slips into one of their dens."

"They'd hustle it out, all right."

"They'd turn us into honey in the length of a buzz; clap us into a hundred cells, worse than jail." A slow elderly bee passed him, leaving a low warning hum in the air. "Come on, kid," he whispered, turning quickly. "I've a sweet tooth, all right, but I'd rather live on lemon-juice the rest of my life than try for wild honey."

"It could be done," I asserted, following him, "with masks. Why, here's our partnership beginning, Ed! There'll be

enough honey stored in the fall to make us rich. Honey's money, once get it to the stores."

"You'll have to partnerize alone there, kid," he said. "It gives me the goose-flesh. Ugh! Get away!" This last was to another bee that sailed leisurely about his head, harmless yet, though multiply it by a million and not so harmless then.

When we were safely past the hive-pots I looked back. Here and there bees rose into the late afternoon, drowsily, scouting out the weather, I suppose,—an earnest of the great swarms that would assail the blackberry blooms, the miles of wild raspberries along the corduroy roads later on. Doubtless we had walked over hundreds and hundreds of pounds of black honey waxed to the roofs of rock faces. Doubtless a city's sweets were stored where boulders, long fallen, formed the sides of the pass, and made a galleried underground of vast luxuriance.

"Yes, well masked it can be done," I said. "Don't mention it to any one."

"Ugh! I'll try not to think of it!" he called, still hasting from the sight. "I'll be lucky not to dream of it. Sugar is sufficient sweet for me. Come on."

And though I laughed at him, something of his uncanny dislike for the place came upon me when the sun suddenly fell behind the bulk of MacIntyre and its rays, chopped by the ridge, died, and went out.

Firelight sticks wonderfully in the memory for being such flimsy stuff; and the pictures that it makes last longer than if they had been chisel-cut. That evening everything seemed to have reached a harmony. We were cured of our ills, the future was opening clear, and while Touch sprawled grotesquely, gaunt and good-looking, entertaining me with tales of his past while I sought to interest him in projects for our future, I was conscious of happiness ringing me around. And presently I fell to the mere quiet enjoyment of it. He, too, was quiet for a time; then said:

"What's eatin' you, Mac? You're so damn dumb."

"Just contented, Ed," and a breath escaped me. I sighed to take in the deliciousness of it all — the pointed flames, the whisperless dark behind, the odor of the balsam knocking at the pulse, the alert satisfaction of his presence.

"Contented, eh? And blowing sighs to the roof like an iron-works. I'd hate to see you downright happy, Mac. It'd blast up the place."

"I am downright happy. When a fellow's been looking for a pal, and finds him — Did you ever have a very good friend, Touch?"

"Tons of 'em."

I think it was a good thing for my sensitiveness to be caloused a little; but that did hurt. And he must have sensed it, for he added: "But none like you, you old stick-in-the-woods; none I ever liked so much."

"I'll remember that when I'm feeling low."

"You'll never feel low, kid, with me around."

"I believe that."

"You'd better. I'm a hand at living up to my word, man. When I meet a pal like you, a pal who's stood up for me in a fight, and carried me through a danged wilderness, and worn his guts out bringing in food to me, there's nothing I would n't do for him. You're a friend in a thousand, Mac, and old Touch ain't the raw crab that'll forget it."

It was my moment of moments, wished for since I could wish. Yet was I satisfied? I could have wanted him less outspoken. Then I chided myself as being too fussy to live. Here I had found a friend and was already grumbling because of his enthusiasm over the friendship.

"There's a thing, but only one, I would n't do for a friend," said he, later, when we were turning in, "and that is stay in these woods one day longer!"

I laughed and turned over and slept — and, opening my eyes, discovered that it was the morrow.

## CHAPTER XI

### ED — REVERSED

**W**E left the blankets and a cache of supplies against the time when we, as partners, should come back for the honey-hunt. And then down the green-walled trail we went, Ed rejoicing with each step that brought him out of the forest, which gave him, as he said, "delirious treemens."

After living in the green grave of the deep wood it is true that wider horizons lifted the spirits and our trail was gay with our exuberance. But beneath the upper stratum of fun I was debating the wisdom of a certain luxury; I was wondering whether it was wise to stop in when we went by Hallie's house. It seemed too tantalizing to pass the very lane without a nod; yet was it wise to allow Touch to see her, when he in that moment of frankness had advised me better not? Also, and this was a more subtle thing, should I show her him?

All the last miles of the long road when hunger had reduced us to small speech did I debate this question, jealousy contending with loyalty all over the floor of my mind. And I smile now at the powerlessness of one over the other. I smile, too, at the way the question was settled for me by mere circumstance. For along that ribbon of road there were no homes, we had brought no food, and though it was still well before noon when we came in sight of her home — with a wraith of wood smoke rising above the chimney — and though my friend was quite ignorant of whose smoke it was, there was no holding him back from seeking sustenance indoors. I made the



possible objections, my decision having come to a sudden head.

"You're a donkey, Mac. You say you are hungry. You admit that it's three miles to Saranac Lake and that this is the last house. You see what the smoke says, and yet you're for pushing on. Well, I wunt."

"That smoke says that dinner's over, more than likely," I interpreted weakly.

"You're glass-eyed. See how it wreathes itself into words, spellin' out fried ham, and taters, and there's the last end of the word 'griddle-cakes' for you."

"Come on. Let's reach the Lake and rest there for keeps."

"Do you think I'm going a foot further in the face of that invitation?" he expostulated, leaning against a stump wearily. "See there! The word 'griddle-cakes' is lengthening out. I swear, it reads 'and syrup'! See, right against that cloud." The smoke did linger along, blue, inviting, almost toothsome.

"Are you coming?" I called impatiently. "They're unlikely people that live in that house and I'll have nothing to do with them."

"So you know them, you chump? That settles it. Follow me."

"I will not," I said, stubbornly angry and a little anxious.

"By the seven virgins, you need n't!" he exclaimed. "Look at it!" I looked and saw a girl appear,—Hallie, excessively attractive even at that distance. She had come out at a side door and had vanished around back.

Ed looked at me and winked. "Do you think I'm going to leave that? That's not exactly your Uncle Ed's intentions."

In a moment I was plunged into the deepest chagrin. I had said that they were unlikely people; that I would have nothing to do with them! And then this vision! Ed took me up on the very topic as he hustled up the lane toward the spot where she had disappeared, I following like a reluctant sheep.

"So you're coming? I thought you'd have nothing to do with these people. You'd better hurry on to Saranac Lake, kid, you're so damn anxious to get there."

"I thought that we were going to stick by each other," I reminded him, with a dawning bitterness.

"So we will. So we will, kid," he said impatiently. "I'll meet you there in the morning."

"In the morning!" My heart turned over. "You'll do nothing of the sort. We'll go together or part for keeps."

He stopped, a surprise shining in his clear gaze. "Then I guess it's so-long and good luck, kid." He said it so lightly that the meaning of it but grazed my consciousness, yet doing it a dull hurt.

"Touch!" came my cry, and just then she appeared again around the corner, pausing with a smile to look at the queer procession that we made, I hanging behind, Touch varying his pace with argument and hunger. If she recognized me her nod did not show it very well, and my anger was not cooled to see that she seemed to look with equal favor on the tall youth who knew enough to take off his hat to her with a considerable gallantry.

"Could two fellows work off the price of a meal?" he asked. "We're husky, but we're pretty hungry, too."

"I guess so," she said, smiling, showing still no sign that she and I had spent an immortal hour together. She left us, to ask her father.

"God, man!" sighed Ed, in a rapture of superiority that nettled me beyond words. "So that's the kind you'll have nothing to do with? Well, you likely said it with Ed Touch around. He would have something to do with her and there's not enough of her for two, that's plain."

"You talk like a man sat down to a beefsteak."

He did not hear me, his eye gazing the wide fields that rolled to the spruce woods lifted superbly toward the lazy clouds of spring.

"Gosh! I think I'll live here. It looks a little lonely for a girl like that."

If she had not nodded so coolly I would then and there have told him that this was my Hallie, whose love I had culled from my dreams and made into a reality. But she had been cold as the clouds and my pride was not yet equal to the humility of confessing her. I could hear him say: "Is that little *icicle* your Hallie?" I could hear his loud laugh. "Is she the one you've raved of for a week?"

No, I could not bear that! My impulse was to leave, to amputate my disappointment and leave it quivering, to seek my old comradeship of the spruces that would not go back on me. Then I laughed at my own childishness. I would not have left her with him if she had spat upon me.

Touch was still maundering on with the old tune: "Nothing to do with her? So you'll have nothing to do with her? Why did n't you tell me that there was a girl like that up in this female desert, Mac? If I'd known there was a girl like her up here do you suppose I'd 've been sitting up in that cave in them woods — like a caterpillar in its muss of a nest? Why, she's a honeysuckle of a girl! Did you ever see such pink and white this side a laurel bush? Did you ever see such a look of a mountain spring flowin' from a girl's eyes?"

"You're real poetical," was all I could think of to sling at him.

"Poetical! Huh! I ain't strong for reading poetry, but I don't mind acting it. You're a stone-pile; kid, if you don't melt a little at the corners at a sight like that!" And he gave me a crack across the shoulder.

"I guess she ain't coming back," I said, hopefully, after a while.

He looked at me in a towering compassion and with a superior kindliness that curled back his lips a little said: "Then I'll wait. Are you going?"

"If she don't come in three shakes we'll go."

"Do you believe that?" he asked quietly. "Why, I'm going to live here. Oh, boy!" and he gave a whoop that struck like a pitchfork through my vitals.

"Do *you* believe that?" I asked as sarcastically as the hurt in me permitted. "Then you've a memory shorter than a toadstool. I thought you and me was going to make a partnership over to Saranac Lake."

"That was before I seen her."

"Why should that change things?"

"Now I'm going into a partnership with her." He gave a merry whistle.

"You take a lot for granted."

"You have to — with women."

His confidence, his arrogant sweeping aside of all that the past week had meant to me, and his apparent mastery of the situation froze my thinking power at its sources. We stood in front of the low white farm-house, he pawing up the gravel of the path with his big shoes and patting it back impatiently, I wearing the pack and trying to conceal the deadly sickness that seemed to be stiffening my heart. My brains refused to flow. I was as much use to myself as a horse-trough that's been stopped solid by a cold spell.

"Touch, listen," I began, and I think I was about to tell him that this girl was the Hallie of whom I had talked, when he heard her returning, saw her whisking around the corner, flashingly-lovely with a smile of welcome that lit her into an intoxication for him and made me as a mere wistful nothing beneath my pack.

"I'm sorry to have been long. Dad was out with his cows. He says come right in. Dinner's nearly ready and there's lots of it,—a new ham, really."

"Just what we read in the smoke," said Touch, briskly, stepping up to her side, and going on with his chatter as if he were her lover and I their serving-man or something. If

I was slow, dazed, there was this excuse: I had just fallen over a spiritual precipice.

The difference between falling from an actual cliff and over a spiritual precipice is this: the first kills you sure, the second leaves you half alive to suffer. The one lands you somewhere, the other allows you to go on falling, falling, from deep to blacker deep, until the spirit suffocates. For some minutes now I had been falling and it had been bad enough to know that it was the edge of friendship that had crumbled and let me over. But now the catastrophe was to quicken; for Hallie, beyond a civil question or two, gave no sign that she knew me and less that she was in love with me. In fact, I had to conclude that she was n't. I had built up a grand passion from one look in a wagon and a week of wood smoke. And I fancied lover-wise that she must love me because I loved her, cast a flood of looks at her, a flood of sighs that were never answered by more than a careful civility. She had, apparently, been blown away by the first puff of talk from that lean, rackety youth, Touch. I unslung my pack in the kitchen, went out to the pump and washed, and in again, to find the ham and potatoes smoking on the table. I was in a rebel's mood, and in the same I greeted the good-humored Mr. Brewster with a surly grace.

"Well, well, MacIntyre, glad to see you again. You're just in time for a big killing. Sit down, boy, there opposite Hallie."

I sat there, perishing for one look from her eyes, like that last when she had left me and Tess at the entrance to their lane.

But she was busy slicing the ham, which ran juice from the blanket of fat about it, with the browned sugar on its outsides crumbling, and the odors of it savory enough to make an empty jug water at the mouth.

"Hallie cooked it," Brewster went on, "and I recommend her as a cook, my boy." At which he gave me an unscrupu-

lous wide wink, which I could return with only a thin lemony grin. "Gee, I forgot!" he exclaimed, "how is that *sister* of yours?" He laughed so heartily and repeated this witticism so loudly that I felt like crumpling up inside from the sheer spite of things.

"I have n't seen her for a week," I said, looking as black as the inside of an oven, "and don't care if it's another."

"Tut, tut, my boy! is that a *brotherly* way to talk!" And he laughed till the ham shook on its platter. I hoped that Hallie would n't hear him; but I need n't have worried, for she and Touch were as gay as sparrows chirping in wall-ivy.

For a few minutes more Mr. Brewster tried to pull me out of my ill humor, but he could n't have fetched a smile if he'd ordered one with a carving-knife, and so he switched to pleasanter company, leaving me to stare about the homelike paradise wherein I was the only item out of place. The table was set in a sunny-windowed end of the kitchen, which was a large, motherly sort of room, with its masterful-looking range on one side, its sweet-eyed window-boxes on two others, and from the fourth a pantry opening off with rows of preserves, like soldiers, ready to march out and do their duty on Brewster's hearty command. I caught Touch's eye taking it all in, too, while he was bantering along,—first with Hallie, to whom he was forever saying something pretty about her hair, her eyes, her what not, and then to her dad, about his house, his lands. You might have supposed that this youth, who had been so taciturn, so sarcastic in our refuge, was composed of peaches and cream. Certainly he talked at ease and unconcernedly as if father and daughter had a great taste for him, as indeed I was beginning to fear that they had.

"It sure is one tight little home that you've got." He smiled.

"Thank Hal for that," said the pleased man, smiling around a forkful of potato. "She's the great little home-maker."

"All right; I thank her," said Touch gaily, passing back for another helping of ham.

"Mr. Touch will be disappointed if you make him think that," she said, "when it's really all Aunt Sallie."

"Who's Aunt Sallie, then?"

"She's the most capable woman! She taught me everything I know about bread-making and bed-making and keeping cheerful when the butter's sulky in the churn."

"Then she must be a regular steam-enjyne," was his comment while reaching for the potatoes, "a regular steam-enjyne. Say, Miss Hallie," (she did n't seem to mind that, either!) "did you ever see one of those steam toys?"

"No, I never laid eyes on one, Mr. Touch, have you?"

"Lord, yes!—I mean la, yes, Miss Hallie! I've rode behind the puffing things. Sometime I'll drive you out to the Forks. It ain't such an awful drive in a buggy for two. And we can take a ride on one. You'd like that."

"Indeed I would! Tell me a lot about it," she asked with a warmth of interest that seemed unnecessary.

Neither had I seen a steam-engine and I'd've been keen, too, to hear about it if Touch had n't gone on as if he had invented the thing. This fellow who had traveled around from the Forks to Westport, from Plattsburg to Malone, acted as if he'd thrown in to his travels Europe and Africa as well. It sickened me, his assurance, but it did n't seem to bother Hallie or her father, who kept asking him questions. And every question swelled his importance. He was the lion of that meal, as the saying is, and the pig as well; for he lost no time, in between boasts, lifting with fork and knife, to the eternal loss of the larder.

I could taste nothing, though I swallowed stolidly from the mere force of emptiness, hating Touch's flatteries of Hallie, loving her deserts of them, and abominating myself for the idiot I was in not being able to mix with their gaieties. I wondered if she knew how much I suffered. Indeed, I won-

der still if there is as much in this intuition of woman's as we charitably suppose; if so, how could a girl sit within two yards of a lover enduring intolerable pain on her account and not know it! She was very civil, of course, and tried once or twice to include me in the talk, but I succeeded only in biting my cheek, as we say.

"Would n't you like that too, Mr. MacIntyre?" she asked me.

"Like what?" I said, half choking on a drink of milk to answer her.

"Why, to be fare-man on one of those lovely trains, whisking from city to city?"

"No 'm," I said doggedly. "I don't know as I'd prefer it to my woods-running." Then I immediately hated myself for seeming sour about it.

"Oh, Mac and his woods!" laughed Touch, good-naturedly. "You can't separate them. Mac'd rather stare at an old pine that's only good for toothpicks than eat honey out of a girl's hand."

They all laughed at my redness, though Mr. Brewster tempered it for me by saying, "Well, there's always a sting behind honey, even if it is in a girl's hand. And a pine makes pretty good looking, don't it, Mac?"

I was so grateful to him that I should have gone on getting more cheerful, I believe; but the mention of honey had reminded Touch of that great bee colony in the pass, and so he must out with it all, like a school-girl about her first kiss, just as though he and I had n't promised to keep it dark for partnership purposes. Hallie and her father were again greatly interested and though she soon rose to clear the table and bring on the pie, he and Touch actually began discussing how best to get out that honey. I was reset in my moodiness.

In fact, I was so absorbed in my conflicting feelings of love unrequited, of friendship quit, that I awoke only in time to see Touch reach across me for a second piece of pie, giving a



scornful laugh, saying: "Oh, Mac's a dreamer! You ought've seen him dream, up in our cave. Mac'd dream about the soul of a huckleberry till the cows came home." At which they laughed. "And speaking of cows, Mr. Brewster, I noticed you've got a pretty fine herd out there."

How in the devil Ed had had time to notice the cattle, much less to divine that cows were Mr. Brewster's chief hobby, I know not. But from that instant they never left the topic; and soon the two of them had fled from the table for a closer inspection of the beasts. Pop and I had never been able to afford a cow and they were the one sort of creature I did n't like. So here again the universe seemed against me.

"Why don't you go out with Dad and your friend?" asked Hallie. "They're a fair sight."

"I don't need a fairer," I thought, but it seemed too much like an echo of Touch to say it, so I contented myself with announcing that I'd stay and help her.

"Help me? I don't like a man in the kitchen."

"But, Miss Brewster!" (Touch had started in with "Miss Hallie.")

"Not for a minute!" she cried, good-naturedly. We argued a little, but with the foreseen result that I had to stroll across the threshold with my old mood upon me as heavy as a dead moon.

Afternoon sun lay with an unheeding brightness across the fields. The ploughed lands fell away, patient with promise, to the woods; and as I stood upon the stoop, the beauty of it all knocked at my heart. But it knocked in vain, for there I had but one inclination—to stamp out the world. I was angry with Touch, with myself, even with her (a little), as a sudden song of her bubbling spirit, entirely too happy-sounding to be genuine, I thought, came from between the clink of plates being cleaned, of closet doors opened, and the other preparations for putting things to rights.

How could she be so happy if she loved me at all? If she

even liked me? Even if she had the smallest regard for human feelings, I thought. She came to the door with a bucket.

"Let me pump it," I said, reaching for it. She shook her head, gaily, almost teasingly.

"Well, I'm going to!" I cried, following her to the pump. A curious smile shone in her two violet-blue deep pools of innocence, those eyes that held her soul of souls for him to read who would. I had a hand on the pail. But she was obdurate. "You'll spill it. Please!"

"Let me."

"Please!" She had a strong pull.

"Am I to be put off by everybody?" I cried in vexation.

"Or meddle in everything?" she retorted, smiling.

I used some strength to uncurl her fingers from the pail.

"Shame on you!" she added, struggling to hold it.

We fought on, I admiring her perseverance, she getting more solemn all the while. I think that the shortest chuckle on the part of either of us would have precipitated our hearts pell-mell, each to the other, for so small is the margin between tears and laughter, between appreciation and misunderstanding. Certainly my heart was eager to leap out in Christian embrace, so harvest-sweet she looked, so close we were together. Then suddenly the feminine of her changed her tactics; she stopped, flashing, panting, and said, "If this is the way you treat girls, that other one must be black and blue."

"What other?" asked I, forgetting that others could exist.

"Oh, fie, Mr. MacIntyre! Have you forgot her already? That makes you out worse and worse."

"Do you mean Tess Mitten? She's nothing."

"Fie, fie!"

"I mean she's a nice girl, but nothing to me. She's forgot me already."

"That is surprising!"

"But I'm going to see that you won't."

"My bruises will remind me of you for a week, anyway. If I have to put them in a poultice I'll doubtless hear them say, 'Remember Mr. MacIntyre,' but it's not what I call civility in a stranger."

"Not a stranger, Miss Hallie,"—this I ventured. Evidently thinking she had got enough breath or that I'd spent too much, she resumed the struggle. I judged that now was the time, if ever, to be master in my own house, and decided to assert my strength; so, wiry and bewitching as were her arms with her sleeves rolled to the elbow, I firmly released them from their hold, and went to the pump, she gasping.

"I'll never forget this," she exclaimed; "a stranger like you taking —"

"No stranger now," I said, crowding a lot into the "now" and holding the pail out of her reach.

She stood an instant poised, very close, reaching up, I looking down into the brown-gold of her hair, not caring for the flush that darkened on her face, or the tears brimming in her eyes, and so was at a loss why she so suddenly should have fled into the house. Oh! The whimsicality of woman! I righted the pail, filled it, bore it to the kitchen. She was not there, though a suspicious rustle quieted away. An empty victory!

It was easy work washing up the dishes and never in my life had I found dish-washing and even cleaning the pans (which I hate) such a joyous task. For every time a plate clinked against another it said, "It's for her." And I began to whistle and unload my ill spirits with the tunes until my habitual joy came back. "Just you wait, girl," said my hopes to me; "I'll make you like me yet."

When I'd rinsed out the pans and wrung out the cloth and fixed up the kitchen as well as I could, and still no sign of her, I was no bit daunted. "I'll earn you, I'll earn you," I said to myself a hundred times over, until the room seemed

too small to hold my satisfaction and I went out again upon the stoop. The loveliness of the waning day rested softly on the white barns. "Touch and I'll soon have to leave," I planned all to myself, "but I'll return and —"

The whanging of a barn-door announced the two men, still busily talking cow. I fancied that Ed looked at me a trifle curiously as he approached.

"You still here?" were his first words, in a queer tone.

"Well, of course. Did you suppose that I'd go without you?"

"I guess you'll have to, old pal. Hard luck, Mac, but surprises will happen."

"I suppose you've decided to settle here for life?" I said, sickening at my own joke.

"Right-o, my boy! You're a good little guesser, ain't you! Mr. Brewster's hooked me up for a great job. You don't care, do you?"

"Are you going to quit what — what we said at the very first, Ed?"

"Better first than in the middle. Can you blame me?"

I had hated him at the table, but that was momentary. He was my friend, — my first, best, and only, — and the careless way he had of disposing of me hurt! Even he saw that, and said: "I'm real sorry, Mac. But Mr. Brewster, — well, he needs a man and I need a job, and —"

"And there's another reason," interposed Mr. Brewster, coming up from having fixed the barn-door, and giving me an audacious wink, "which you might have guessed if you'd been at the dinner-table, Mr. Mac."

"Well, I was there!" I exclaimed angrily.

"Oh, no, you was n't! You was off somewheres, dreaming about your sister." At this stale joke both he and Ed guffawed heartily, which was scarcely soothing.

"He understands," laughed the elder man to Ed.

"Sure, Mac was young once," said Touch, scornfully.

"Well, I hope Miss Brewster can take care of herself!" I cried, nettled beyond restraining myself.

"What do you mean by that?" asked her father, sober at once.

"Yes, what do you mean by that?" queried Touch, turning abruptly.

"Everything that can be meant," I said, "and nothing that need be explained to people who know you. But the other kind ought to be warned."

"See that Aunt Sallie warns her about me," said Touch, arranging a smile for Mr. Brewster's benefit, while for me a fierce light shone in the depths of those enigmatic eyes.

"Good-by, sir," I said to Mr. Brewster. "I've got to go."

"Won't you stay to supper?" he said kindly. "Me and Hallie'll be mighty pleased if you will. And don't mind Ed here; he —"

"No, it's quite a piece yet and I'd better be going."

"That's a fact, Mac, if you want to get there," said Touch; "and give my regards to Tess when you sleep with her," he added, snickering.

Mr. Brewster broke into a roar at this, while a sudden anger rose to my inarticulate lips.

"Indeed, I'll take no memory of you a yard further! I wash your name from my lips and your face from my thoughts."

"That's all right, just so you keep your lips and your thoughts sweet and fresh for little Tess. So long, Macky." And he turned away once more with a jaunty shrug of the shoulders, to go in to Hallie.

We were not so far from the kitchen window that I could n't hear a suppressed laugh, and burning to the roots of my hair I made as to get away. But Mr. Brewster put a hand on my shoulder with a quick sympathy, saying, "Is it a matter I can help with, Mac?"

His kindness came near being my undoing and I could only shake my head and stride, helpless, from the yard. I could not look back and I even forgot, until I was out on the highroad, that I had left my pack in the kitchen. And then I was too proud to return for it, too proud and too utterly miserable.

For behind me lay my future, ahead of me my past, and on me a great weariness of soul.

Beauty seems no balm for one in certain sorts of hurts. But beauty is ever present in my mountains, ever ready to steal upon one at the first lifting of the clouds. And that afternoon, through which the quiet of evening was already stealing, did its best to gild my desolation with its golden glory. On every hand the forest ran to the feet of the distant mountains, which still wore their souvenirs of winter in bare places. Beyond these and to the horizon's verge other ranges lay blue in undulating rest. The pines and hemlocks now closed about me, and now opened as if to cheer with an invitation to look wide, and the very curves of the ever-curving way plied me with shining vistas to waylay my dark mood.

Yet, except in moments, I was still sunk in a bitterness that was too much my own fault to offer me tears of heart-break. We break not our own hearts. It was a bitterness that seemed too close to be relieved. Yet as I walked along that road, the very last traverse of which had been tuned to such mounting hopes, the level sun kept me from being utterly mournful. "Certainly not," I said to my despair.

The very act of walking was an aid. Nor can seventeen remain quite obdurate to hope so long as it frequents the wholesome wild. Once when the shaft of a great balsam soared before me my heart gave a little gasp of coming-to, gave a leap at the sight of that wondrous spire lifting into the pale high solitudes of sky as if it would disentangle itself

from all that bound it. And I halted with all the force of my ambition, saying: "I'll be something for her yet; I'll be it yet, God help me!"

And so it was that with her constantly in my mind I gave scarcely a jump to see a flutter of skirts about the curve ahead, to recognize that laughing, light-footed faun of a girl who leapt a log by the roadside and came to a stop in the road, my pack upon her shoulders.

"You here!" I exclaimed, bluntly enough. "What for?"

"Looking for a stray wolf," she said, "a very savage, gloomy wolf." I helped her to unloose my pack-basket, a strange desire afflicting my arms that were so nearly around her. But instead of hugging her I stood by, smiling in a great confusion.

"Don't grin like that," she said, laughing; "it's against natural history for wolves to grin."

"It's against nature for them to be grateful, too," I said, "which proves I ain't all wolf." I shouldered the basket. Suddenly she became confused.

"I wanted to thank you for the dishes," she said. "They were very well done."

"That wa'n't nothing," I said, slipping into the old drawl. "Anybody'd've done them."

"I don't suppose Mr. Touch will do them," she said, trying, I think, to help me.

"Shucks, it wa'n't nothing!" was the best I could think to say. "And to think of you carrying my pack all this way!"

"I knew a short cut," she said, poised, ready to run back. I could not bear to part now she had come. As watchers of the moon must be dumb at its new-risen loveliness so was I dumb with the misty-gold of her hair, her alert figure in the sunlight, as lithe and living as a candle-flame.

"Hallie!" I cried in the unloosed joy of her presence.

Laughing, but with a gentleness withal, she leaped back

over the log, teasing my rapture with the words, "Now, I sha'n't keep you from her another minute."

I stared, lost in her flamelikeness.

"Your sister." With a graceless laugh at my discomfiture she was off into the bushes and lightly gone.

This time the jest fell on ears unprovoked. Did I not know, now? Let her tease with words: deeds are proof. And her deed was the bringing of the pack. The dead-weight of life had been lifted from my shoulders as I adjusted my basket to them. For I felt that her heart was in it, a very little of it, perhaps, but that was there.

I struck out along the wild road; my stride lengthened, and the ashes of the afternoon were warmed again into life by the spark of hope that lay life-red in the bottom of my heart.

"I'll win her yet. I'll be something for her yet," said my footfalls in the mounting rhythm of my march; and ere three stars were lit over Saranac Lake I had come in sight of its low houses, to the burden of that refrain.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE BOTTOMLESS PIT: FIRST GLIMPSE

**T**HROUGH the window of my mother's house shone lights and from its chinks and crannies came noises betokening a revelry of no extraordinary gentleness.

"Very different from the last time," I thought and took the precaution to slip around to the back and have a first view of the party.

I saw, through that very pane which had revealed her heart-break, a sight that now caused mine. A table, a lamp flickering in its center, bottles and tall glasses, Ma, with the forced gaiety of alcohol, sitting opposite a logger, also half-drunk, Tess and a lanky, unpleasant-faced youth completing the quartet.

"Hallie must not know!" was the first thought that came to me, rising clear from the misery I felt. So this was the safety Ma had promised Tess! And so this was the expenditure that was to eat up my daily fifty-cent-piece! Whisky even then was expensive.

I withdrew from the window, thinking. Was I freed? I even walked part way back along the road from Saranac. Then I stopped, in a quandary. There was no welcome for me at the Brewsters'. I determined to take a hand in and not run away from my shame. I would clear them out. And while the impulse was still warm I ran up and knocked at the front door.

Inside I heard low mumblings, some godless laughter, but

distinguished no noises that indicated a welcoming. The door was locked. I put my shoulder to it, carried away the crazy lock with a mere push, and stumbled into the midst of them quite careless of how I should be received. After the shock of that first look what would matter!

The two women gave a united little scream, rising; the men remained seated — probably that being the steadier course for them.

"Itsh crowded, feller," said the logger. "Watchyu want?"

"Shut the door, you fool," said the lank youth. "Can't you see, the lamp's going out."

"Mac!" gasped Tess.

"You're very prompt with your entrance. We heard your knock," said Ma. "We'd've opened it in a minute."

"I don't think any of you'd been able in another minute," I said savagely.

"I suppose you came to leave the money for Tess," she continued, ignoring my remark.

"Itsh too crowded," repeated the logger. "I'm too crowded, too." Nevertheless he raised his hand to pour out another glass. I stopped him. Gathering up the two whisky bottles and pressing them into his arms, I led him to the door. He was in that stage, partly docile, and more than partly drunk, where chivalry floats uppermost for a brief moment; and so, clutching Ma's hand with one of his, and trying hard not to spill his bottles, he bowed to kiss it. The sight sickened me. I pressed his face out of reach, crying, "You shall not touch my Ma!"

The emotion I felt must have reached even his besotted brain, for he looked up at me — and a fine fellow he would have made, sober — and said, "Your Ma?"

"Yes," I said. "Will you go, now?"

He got to the door, and then turned and said: "It's rum, son, about her bein' your Ma. It's rum."

Still chivalrous, he bowed to us all, almost falling in his fumes, and saying once more: "That's rum, son, but this — this is whisky," and overcome with this remark he stumbled out backforemost. At this ridiculous end the lank youth laughed outright; but I had no humor for mirth.

"Come on, follow him!" I shouted, thoroughly angry. "Hustle your own drunken legs out of here."

"Nix," he said.

"Don't nix me!" I said, despising him, and seizing the poker I brought it down with a tremendous rattle on the stove, "or that's what'll happen to your head."

"Might ash well," he said. "Comin', Tess?" He grabbed for her wrist, but she drew back and he fled beneath the uplifted poker.

My rage had mounted until I saw flame. "Come on, stopper it," I commanded Tess, who was whimpering behind a chair. "Stopper it and come help me clean up this mess."

"You'll pay for this work," said my mother, whose senses had grown appreciably clearer with the noise.

"I know that better than ever you can know it," I said, visioning Hallie peering into my family's life and seeing a father toping in his den, a mother toping in hers, and myself running the country with a girl who was of too free-ranging habits to be called decent company.

There was one thing in my favor: I had not scrupled to take the reins in my own hands this time, though the half-intoxicated woman and the girl presented a rather tame team to boast of. So when I decided that the best place to drive them was bed, it did not take a very high hand to accomplish it. I detained Tess a moment as she was going in to their room — there was only one bedroom in the house — to say: "You want to be packed up early in the morning. I'm going to take you out of this." She said nothing, but slumped sullenly by me; and, indeed, I did not care whether she spoke or not. I did n't know where to take her, for I

knew that Placid was out of the question. But I could not have her saying that I had brought her to her ruin, which was the open result I could see now of staying in that house.

The noise over and with nothing left in the room — which still stunk of their pipes and the whisky and the food — but me and the weary lamp, I realized all the dreariness of hunger and disappointment combined. I could not eat in such a mess, so while I put a fire in the stove and some potatoes to boil I cleaned up the place more thoroughly than it had been cleaned this century, I warrant. And once, while I was dusting the wall things, I came face to face with a mirror — almost the first I'd ever had a good look in — and I gave myself the benefit of a long gaze: I looked younger than I felt at that moment, with foolish-looking peach down on my upper lip and down my cheeks, the brown color hiding beneath the skin, and a steady sober stare in my eyes that looked back into mine as if to say, "Mac, what are you, anyway?" I looked into them deep and long and strove to read myself, and all the time ran through me that resolution to "be something for her sake," meaning Hallie's. A fellow is fortunate to have a girl to work for. I had two, I thought, with a wince; but I'd soon work off the one and be ready to start to be able to support Hallie. This comforted me so that I ate with considerable pleasure, dragged the lounge out of the house, whose walls seemed to suffocate me, and slept a dreamless sleep, waking in time to have a breakfast ready for them with what materials I could find in their sluggardly den.

My mother seemed the same as on that evening I had first met her, and instead of beginning to scold me for the scene I had made, really thanked me for it, intimating that the whisky-party was hardly of her choosing. I ignored this explanation and awaited Tess.

"She's not going to get up this morning. She's not feeling well."

"She's got to get up," I said, "for I must find a safe

living-place for her until I can get it made up with her aunt." I dwelt on the word "safe."

"I'm proud of you, 'Son," said my mother. "You've Bill's way with you. I used to point him out to you as a good example."

"Well, I'm not proud of you and — and I wish I was."

"I'll do better now you're here, 'Son. Did you bring the money for the first week's board?"

"I've been all this time bringing in Touch. You rout out Tess for me and as soon as I get her fixed I'll bend to and earn the back pay as quick as quick."

"She'll not leave till the last cent's paid." Ma reached for the sugar and began stirring her coffee with the handle of her knife. "And you'd better treat her real gentle, Anson. She's a headstrong gal."

I looked up at her, her tone was so much more significant than the words.

"She thinks you ought to marry her," said my mother, trying not to make it out much of a speech.

"Marry her!" I gasped. "Marry Tess? In the name of goodness why?"

"Why do girls ever want their fellows to marry them?" she asked. I could only stare at her wide-eyed.

"You ain't so innocent, so thoughtless as all that, 'Son. I guess you know as well as the next fellow that if you carries a gal around the country and anything happens — you know what I mean — she's bound to get talked about. She always speaks of you as 'my fellow Mac.'"

"It's a lie," I cried bitterly. "I'm not her fellow and she's not my girl. She's Led Hooker's girl. I — I never even had a girl."

That little incredulous smile that used to drive my father so wild appeared for a second on the hard face in front of me, but she did not raise her voice.

"Still, you bring her here in the night-time, you board her,

you order her around. Ain't that almost like being a fellow to her?"

A woman's reasoning, yet hard to outreason. A woman 'll start off saying the earth is flat and before you can stop her she'll have made a whole geography out of that one foolishness. I tried to keep my temper, saying: "Tess has got into trouble and I'm partly to blame and I'll try to see her out of it. But I have n't been mixed up in it so — so desperate as that. She knows that and she knows that as far as marrying goes I've got my own girl to marry."

The next instant I'd've given a year's board to have that confession back in my mouth. For I saw a quick triumph in my mother's face, and as if at a signal her tone changed: "Well, 'Son, that's your hard luck — or the other girl's. Judgin' from your Pop's efforts, a MacIntyre is going to have some trouble supportin' *two* wives. First come deserves, say I. And the law'd take Tess's word —"

"Tess's word!" I said.

"Ain't a woman's word as good as a man's?"

"There's a lot more of it," I said in a despair at this new development.

"But ain't it as good?"

"Certainly; why?"

"Well, Tess has given her word that she won't leave me till you've paid up, and you've given your word that you'll pay as long as she's here; so it looks as if I'd be purty comfortable in my old age," and she laughed at me, opposite her. I was apparently caught up for a career of wage-earning in earnest before I could begin laying by for the girl I was to marry.

Life seemed to have been wrung dry of happiness and as quickly as I could I put wood in the box, drew some fresh water, and then left the house, to hunt in the village for that job which was to pay off Tess's board and then lay the quick foundation for my home. Luckily, the first breath of the

pungent open air lifted my spirits above the details of my search, or I should never have had the courage to walk that first mile of my quest.

It was late April and fluffy clouds leaned up over the mountains in an April way, filling the sky with luminous depths. Also April-wise, large drops broke the mirroring river into dancing circles from time to time and then ceased. Walking along an upland road on such a cloud-driven day of opening spring is the swiftest of intoxications and my deft blood had soon washed all irritation from my body. I laughed in the face of Nature.

As I neared the town I thought more of Hallie and less of my job-hunting and when a particularly playful cloud happened to let down a whole bellyful of blue upon me I laughed even louder in the face of Nature, and almost at the same time in the face of a farmerish-looking man with whom I had nearly collided.

"Bad morning, ain't it, boy?"

"That's so, it may be," I assented cheerfully. I was above the clouds, personally.

"Well you're chipper enough."

"I suppose I am," I said, trying to accustom myself to his level. "I'm hunting for a job."

He looked at me quizzically. "Gosh! If you feel that-a-way when you're looking for one, what'll you be when you get one puzzles me."

"I'll show you," I replied quickly enough, "if you'll supply it."

He asked me what kind I wanted and if I knew horses. Since my knowledge of horses was limited to their appearance at the hitching-post, he said I would not do for him, though had I been a horse-fancier he could have used me. This turn-down left me slightly reduced in spirits. The brilliance of the morning seemed suddenly much weaker.

In the village I got down to a routine, asking tall loggers,

humpish shopkeepers, tanned farmers, and even at the headquarters of the itinerant barber, but either they had no jobs or my qualifications for trail-running and star-gazing did not fit into their schemes for making a living. As the morning wore on and I soon exhausted the little place, the bubble of my early morning fancy was bled of its bubblishness and I sank for good beneath the clouds. And now, beneath them, I noticed that it was downright rainy.

I had come out at the other side the village in my anti-triumphal progress and going down the river a way looked back upon the morning. Too briskly then had I imagined myself on the hills of conquest. Now I saw them still before me and even further off. "Oh, Hallie, Hallie!" I cried to the puddly road; but with her name returned my old resolves of being something for her, and I had to laugh, thinking of the discrepancy between my resolve and my performance. I wanted to run and hide forever from the face of people.

Indeed, in my desperation I did start to run along the stream, through the new greening grass, the rain spitting in my face, and blinding me. My foot sloughed into a woodchuck's hole and I completed my descent to earth, begun with that first farmer. I flopped down in the meadow in a boneless sort of way a crab-apple jelly might. I sat there, a human heap. "Damn," formed on my lips to be said, but the breath to say it had been spent, and the energy. So I laughed a dry laugh, the only dry thing about me — laughed for the very bitterness I felt. Here was I, huddled limp in a wet meadow, unable even to run from my own fate. My clothes clung to me, the little river freed from its first taste of humanity swirled joyously away, mocking me. I looked about me without the will to get up. The meadow I sat in rose on the right to a house, the most attractive I had ever seen, and in the whimsical mood I was in I said to myself: "Pretty comfortable-looking place, Mac. Suppose you move in there."

I have never lacked for imagination, and from that very



moment, my foot still aching from the wrench and the rain raining as if it were afraid of being late, I saw the future as I wanted it: myself in overalls working for the farmer that owned that house. I fancied it more than I had ever fancied an employment before. I was already occupying his field; it seemed but a short step to occupy his house; and saying to myself that a faint heart ne'er won a farmer, I hobbled up to the porch, trying on a variety of bold faces to see which was the most compelling.

The hardest was thinking up some opening of the conversation by which they could seize no chance to turn me away instantler. I knocked, not tremblingly as I would have fifteen minutes before but with a large confidence that was partly due to my keeping Hallie, as a sort of silent partner, in my heart. A spruce young woman, very young (I thought) to be owning such a place, and with dancing dark eyes, opened the door and I began: "Please, sir — that is, please ma'am — could I have — that is, would you mind giving me a drink?"

The dancing eyes danced over me and finally into my face, not unkindliwise but certainly searchingly. They looked at the puddle that was collecting from me on the porch, took in the river that I'd just left, included the rain which had left off being an April shower and had become a credible down-pour for any month; and they wondered, did those eyes, how I could possibly be anxious for more water. But the woman said: "Would n't you rather have something hot, like coffee? We're just at dinner ourselves."

"If there's any men-folks around I'd like a word with them," I said, after she'd taken me around to the shed, where I'd be near the coffee and yet not spoil the carpet with my drippings.

"Andrew," she called into the kitchen, "there's a young man here who aims to have a word with you. Can you come?"

"In two shakes of a cow's tail," came the man's voice, which seemed matched to the woman's for pleasantness.

I ate heartily; for unto the water and coffee had been added much ham (done in the brownest gravy) and potatoes fried lovingly together, and white bread (a thing as rare with me as brown snow would have been) and butter on it, and milk with the butter (I drank near a churnful of it), and to cap all a raspberry pie (entire) for dessert. And I had the modesty not to begin on the second plate of doughnuts.

Mrs. Baker was so nimble in thinking of things for my comfort (they soon had me in with them, sitting on brown papers by the stove and steaming like the lake on a cold morning) and Andrew Baker was so kindly in his questions that my clothes dried and my hopes returned while they were getting from me the things that they wanted to know, and I thought I was telling them the things that they should hear.

I enlarged as much as I dared on my (sudden) passion for barn-yard life, making quotations from Gruntie cover a multitude of swine; and toward the middle of the afternoon Andrew Baker said with a quick look at his wife: "All right, Mac, I've a mind to try you out. Suppose you take that pail there and see how much milk you can bring in. We've only two cows, Silky and Sulky. Sulky's the Holstein and you'd better milk her first, for she's a sly bit jealous of Silky. If you ain't gone too long, maybe we can aim to fix up something."

I took the pail, with the sinking of the nerve that pervades the victim of his own large sayings. I regretted mightily now my pose of wisdom. I wished that I had admitted my total, no-matter-how-surprising, ignorance of cows. For then, Mr. Baker seeming a fair man, I might have stood some chance of working for him: a bluffer never. In short, I regretted my entire past life in that brief walk across the barn-yard. Why had I not let deer alone and studied cows? What was a Holstein?

The barn was small and so clean as to be cozy. The rain

fell soothingly on the eaves, and the stool was where my employer (that tantalizing name!) had said it would be. In separate stalls stood the two cows, chewing their fanciless cuds in a sort of pastoral stupor. One was a big black-and-white, who doubled an energetic tail on alternate flanks; the other a smaller cream-colored beast, standing in a less impatient idleness. I would have given much for a key to cows.

Suddenly an idea occurred to me that doubled my desire to become Andrew Baker's hired man. "What I learn from Baker's cows," I thought, "can be applied to advantage upon Brewster's." I would yet oust Touch from his mighty seat and capture Hallie on her own farm. With poignant interest I switched my gaze from cow to cow, in the piercing effort to discern which was the more jealous and therefore Holstein.

"Whichever of you be it," I addressed them, "you're going to be mad jealous of the other before I'm through," and as luck was mine for the day, I fixed the stool near the black-and-white and grasped her teats with a certain delicacy.

The delicacy was too great. My alternate jerkings affected the result by not so much as a drop of milk, though an occasional shiver of protest ran twitching over the sensitive beast.

I applied more strength — with a feeling of apology — and reddened with exertion and also mortification, as only a thin squirt now and then tinkled into the capacious pail. It began to look as though the cow's temper would run out considerably ahead of the milk.

This was beyond words. Here was Hallie, in a way, hanging on a Holstein's generosity (if it was the Holstein). There was Touch grinning at me, as it were, from the scarce-splashed shininess of the milk-flecked pail. And worst of all, within doors, perhaps listening for the dilatory drops, were Andrew Baker and his wife waiting — waiting — as was I — for the milk that never came. The victim got through with waiting, first, and shifted her weight to another set of legs, setting my head-balance against her flank off-poise. The pail

fell between my legs, the stool kicked up its own, and I feared for a moment that the cow would follow the stool's example.

In a sudden rage at the universe, at cows and the mystery of milking in particular, I began again. With a stiffened neck I pinned the brute against her stall, I refixed the pail, the stool, myself; and ignoring the femininity of my victim I began a ruthless milking. To my surprise, ruthlessness was instantly rewarded. The desirable fluid sang into the pail. Almost before I dared look the bottom was covered and the whiteness began to bubble of its own depth. And still I milked, while tears of sweat rolled down my brow and I cannot guess what the Holstein was thinking. Hope raised its head again with the everdeepening *spitchurr* of the song from the twin purring of the streams. I would be a milker yet. That way Hallie lay. And when all the milk and jealousy had been extracted from the Holstein, I repeated my success beneath her sister, cruelly draining her of her minted clover.

"Thirty-three minutes, son," announced Mr. Baker when I entered, one shoulder drooping to the weighted pail. "Were you working by the piece or by the hour?"

"I'm working by the year for you, sir," my high spirits replied.

"There, Andrew, that's not such a limp answer for you!" laughed Mrs. Baker, and I knew they had decided to employ me.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A CHAPTER I'D LIKE TO SKIP

I LEFT the Bakers', a conqueror, promising to return in time for bedding down the callow cows that had so supinely let themselves be milked,—more feed to them for that. I left, a conqueror, but my spirits which usually winded themselves when they flew too high soon began to waver when I launched into a cold-money consideration of my prospects. I was to get my board, of course, and two dollars a week. Tess was costing me three and a half. Problem: when could I lay the hearthstone for Hallie?

In those days marriage was less of a commercial consideration than now, for if two could work together they got married and worked, and no talk of how much it cost to keep a wife. A fellow could build his home from the trees on his lot, get his sugar from other trees, warm himself with still others, raise his bacon beneath them, grow his potatoes beside them, and build his family tree all the while without waiting until he was a financial organization to begin. But I was, in the week since I had first decided to become a man à la Touch, already become richly womaned, as it were. I had a Tess and wanted a Hallie, and as my steps neared Ma's shack the black crow of doubt began to caw in my ear. What would they think of my day's endeavor?

"I got it!" I burst in with.

"What? — the money?" said Ma, who had been lounging at the window.

"No; the job to get the money, at Andrew Baker's. I'm to be chore-boy and live there and get two dollars a week be-

sides." Tess stuck a head, done up in curl-papers, out of the other room.

"What's that?" she asked, looking very sleepy and disheveled.

"Two dollars a week and my board, and I begin to-night."

They burst into a flicker of laughter. "And you went to school?" said Ma. "And now you come in as merry as a whisky-cork over sliding back to us a dollar and a half a week, on Tess's expenses. That's six a month, seventy-two a year, ten years 'll be — let's see —"

"Do you think I won't be raised?" I asked hotly.

"I might raise the charges, too."

"And do you think Tess is going to spend her life here?" I continued.

"Unless you earn enough for a home of your own."

"Which looks a long way off," put in Tess.

"Though he don't seem to worry about time," added Ma.

"Even if marryin' after fifty ain't so social as it might be," continued Tess.

I knew that they were trying to tease me and went about collecting my things for my pack, close-mouthed.

"Did you see Touch drive Hallie by, this morning?" asked Ma of Tess. This shaft hit closer.

"Yes, Mother-in-law," said Tess, doubling with laughter, "though they was sitting so close together you could scarce tell it was two." Both the women went into half-hysterics over their tremendous wit.

"And did n't Hallie call out a message for 'Son here?'"

"Yes, Mother-in-law, but 'Son 'll have to give me a kiss before I deliver it. I'm a pay-in-advance girl now." And they shrieked again.

"You're hell-in-advance," I thought, but held my tongue, and, slipping on my pack, left them rocking in each other's arms, their absurd laughter following me out into the gloom.

From July, in our northern land, summer begins rapidly to wear down hill. And as it wore along down that year of '87 I tasted one after another all the flavors of distress. All, that is, except the bitterness of an encounter with Ed Touch and Hallie. That was spared me. Now I heard of her visiting the Hortons in our village, and now I heard of him passing our house with or without her, but because the Bakers were a little way down the river I never came around that sudden corner of fate which might marry our glances if only for a second.

To be fair, I had one pleasure, also negative: I almost never saw Tess on my short visits home. From midsummer on she had been out-of-sorts, and her complaints, added to her gossiping, had sucked at my spirits like flies on a wound. So when, after a quarrel we had had, my mother suggested that we meet at the post-office for my weekly payment I was unable to conceal my delight.

"That makes two great pieces of news this week," I'd said.

"What's the other?"

"Mr. Baker's giving me three dollars now."

"You'll need it," said she. My mother had the art of salting every joy down with some distasteful thought.

But not every time was her news sung to the dull tune of discouragement, for when September came in she told me that Hallie was in town. And as when Hallie was in town she visited the Hortons, I determined to haunt that neighborhood till my eyes were happy, no matter what happened to my heart.

The inevitable happened, as it always will if you take sufficiently careful steps to see that it does. It was a September evening, hot and sticky as before rain. For the third evening I had accelerated the milking until Silky and Sulky uttered what protest they were capable of, in order to arrive near the Hortons' in *case* she should be going in or out.

"She said she wanted to walk home," called a voice from

the window as I arrived near the place and began to stalk it as usual.

"She has n't been gone long, either," said the voice.

"Thanks," I said, and started on a run, once more out that road which seemed already trodden deep with my emotions. This time they were extremely mixed. Who in that house knew I was interested in Hallie — unless she had let on? Why should I be directed to follow her, unless — unless? I scanned each stretch of the roadway ahead.

She must surely have been lagging, thought I, when I came upon her not half-way to my mother's house. Even then she was walking at no very great speed. I came up behind her as quietly as I would on a spring-trap and said in as even a voice as my poor bellows would permit:

"It's been months and weeks that I've waited —"

She wheeled as I have often seen a surprised doe wheel, and stood.

"It has seemed longer than that to me," she said.

Not knowing how to take the meaning, I went on: "But if I begin to say I'm sorry now —"

"It might take too long. I will be late for supper as it is."

"Why not be late?" I was emboldened to say. "I'll help you get it." And with my heart beating twice to its usual time I told her of picnic meals I had pictured ourselves having with the chipmunks and the birds.

There are happinesses that leave us debtor to the Eternal and that first half-mile — when she admitted that she had thought of me and I told her what I had thought about her — that first half-mile was breathless with bearing so much happiness and only a little haggard for fear that as we began its second half (where my mother's house was to be passed) Tess or she would shame me going by.

But neither of them was to be seen and again I was indrawing breath of heaven when I saw a figure, shawl-clad,



ambling ahead in the middle of the road. "Tess, drat her!" I said half-aloud. There was no way to avoid a meeting.

"Who is it?" asked Hallie.

"Tess Mitten; she's helping my mother."

As we passed she turned toward us, and we heard the sick wail of a little baby. A baby in Tess's arms! I should have been less surprised at a crocodile. Hallie, of course, had to stop, woman-like, and look at it.

"Certainly I remember you," she said; "I remember you from last spring, when Dad and I picked up you and Mr. MacIntyre, here."

Tess gave a cough and a crow's sort of laugh. My, what a wreck she looked in the sultry twilight!

"Whose cute baby is that?" asked Hallie, stopping, though I had her by the arm to go.

"So you think it's cute? Well, it's mine and hisn."

"His?" I heard her clear questioning voice, a world away from me. I felt her arm trying to free itself from mine.

"Sure, Ans' MacIntyre's little girl. Wanta kiss it?"

"You lie, you filthy thing!" I cried. Hallie had wrenched her arm away. I made a choking effort to look at her and through the blur in my understanding perceived her face strained with its sudden twist of grief. "I'll kill you for that lie when I come back," I said to Tess. Hallie already was a yard away from me. Within me the wheels of will had stopped turning for a moment, but involuntarily I went after her.

"Hallie," I called, "slow up a minute."

She made no sign and I caught up with her.

"Hallie!" Still she gave no answer.

"Hallie, dear," I said, "speak to me."

"You have no right to call me that. Please go back." She started along faster and the incredible suspicion that she was believing Tess, that she was trying to escape me, brought a lump into my throat that tore it. "Have you no mercy?"

I besought her. "Will you believe *her* instead of me? A statue would know different."

She kept on, though walking a shade less swiftly, I fancied.

"Tess is mad at me, Hallie, and made up that lie. It is a lie, Hallie. I swear it is. Say you believe me."

"I don't know what to believe," she said, giving a little cry, and stopping. "Oh, Mother!" And then she would say no more. For a dreadful moment we stood there, while the haze crept closer about as if with the first fear of night upon it. "I was rescuing her from—from that, Hallie. Say you believe me."

"I—want—to," she said, very low. I heard the rattle of a wagon behind. "It's my dad," she said, looking for the first time at me in the gathering gloom. "He was to pick me up."

"I cannot let you go not believing me," I said, cut by the pallor of her face. She turned her head away.

Somewhere, when we are at ease from this life and have time to go over the pictures hung along it with gold threads or gossamer, I shall look among the first for that of her climbing up beside her father and casting back at me one glance: compassion and wistfulness and—could I mistake it?—more. And it was well that I was given that glance to cling to, for as I walked back alone and the cruelty of Tess's ingratitude, not to speak of this cruel injustice of Hallie's, ate into me I began to suffer worse. Tess had suffered too—it seemed habitual to that house—but my concern was with myself and anger fused my senses into a dangerous mood and as I passed the slovenly den I turned in.

"Where is Tess?" I yelled to my mother.

"Gone to bed," said she, standing before the door. I pushed her away, but it was locked.

"She told the foulest, dirtiest lie that ever came to a sweet girl's ears," I shouted, and putting my strength against it, broke down the lock, my mother clutching me sharply.

"Son, what are you doing?" screamed my mother.  
"T was not her fault, all."

Tess stood in front of me in the room, white, her mouth that used to show firmness twitching; her eyes, once so bold, now furtive and wet-edged.

"Take it, drown it," she said, holding out the child. "I won't take all the burden."

I stopped short, horrified, preferring the old defiant Tess to this.

"Do away with it, or support us. I'm through."

Indeed, she looked it, as if she had reached the dregs already of that bitter drink called life, which, unless it be mixed with that other, love, is too heavy far for the sensitive palate of eighteen.

"I'll pay a little longer," I said, my anger drowned in pity, "if you'll make it right with her."

Suddenly those eyes, which I had been scanning for a spark of human meaning, brightened a little. "I'll make it right — for you, Mac." And uncomprehending what she meant I left them.

That night when the windless moon looked dully into my room at the Bakers' it found my bed empty. I had gone down river in my wanderings and more than once stood still by its gray mystery, wondering what it would seem like to cease to be.

Youth has acuter agonies than age, I think, and some that it endures salute our Maker with a grave responsibility.

## CHAPTER XIV

### I DELIVER A GILT NIB

**I** THINK a doe whistling to her fawn was the first recalling to the sweetness of existence. Tired, I sat down by the stream and listened to the suck and swirl of its waters. The moon still swam through its wastes of infinite loneliness behind the haze, and the heart of the wood slumbered in the unstirring shadows of the firs. But my old joy in the lapse of night's long hours was coming back to me, despite the tawdry horror of affairs at home; despite the shock to Hallie and the tedious road I had before me with so much earning, so much straightening to do.

Souls have habits, luckily, and it is one of them to cling to hope so long as there be a glimmer of light on the horizon. My glimmer was that inscrutable last glance that she had given me, and with a deep breath of relief at the memory of it I lay back in the sleepy grass. The passage of time seemed to have stopped, to have blent with a still timelessness; the whisper of the waters faded into the larger silence; my sadness past merged with a great peace, and soon I slept.

And when I woke and stripped and splashed in the September waters I found that my loves had all come back to me: hope in the morning and friendliness for open fields and the delight in my own strong body. I ran home and doubtless astonished Mrs. Baker with the dimensions of the breakfast I put away, though goodness knows she had acquired a pathetic patience at refilling plates.

Clear nights soon brought frosts and October days their

flurries, and with autumn the spice of nature strengthened as if the shortening days must compass equal cheer within them. I rejoiced in the comfortable chores, left my mother's pay at the post-office, and dreamt of Hallie, though facing now less vaguely than before my task of winning her. Of her I caught no glimpse, and so I clothed my longings with plannings that would have been not too intelligible to a more practical mind.

But life, I am glad to say, has a way of working through unintelligibles, and the morning that I carried a letter post-marked "Newport" and addressed to Andrew Baker, Esquire, in a close, uneven hand, was the morning (though I knew it not) of my life's turning.

"It's from some Englishers coming up for their health. They want our house," said Mr. Baker.

"You ought to thank Doctor Trudeau for suggesting us, Andrew," said his wife. "Shall we take them?"

"Might as well," he said. "They can't spoil things much."

So I posted the reply and forgot about them. I was n't even up at the house when they arrived. I had gone down to the hardware store to look over traps. Discouragement had eaten into me at last. I meant to clear out from the Bakers', though with regret at leaving them, and take forever to the woods. In fact, I'd got some traps sorted out for otter and mink and muskrat when a couple of gigs pounded by the window with a rattle and the storekeeper and I looked out.

"Hullo, Mac! more strangers! Winter is certainly looking up in these parts."

"They're folks for our house," I said; "English, Andrew Baker said."

"Taken the hull of Baker's?"

"Pretty nigh."

"They'll have to, to stow all them bags. Look at 'em." Another vehicle bounded by with a freight of baggage that obliterated the driver. "Who is it; do you know?"

"I dunno the name. He's a writer, Mrs. Baker said."

Writes books. That reminds me. I was to buy some pens. We have n't any to the house. Got some pens?"

We hunted through several drawers and at last found a boxful, a little rusty, the hardware man joking all the while about writing words for a living. "I'd hate a profession like that," he said, "criticizing people. It must be like undertakin': the more success, the less friends."

"And think of pushing one of those all day," I said, picking up the pens. "Give me a rifle and a line of traps."

"Me, too. Did you see the bear Stevens got over to Placid?"

"Stevens, that's it!" I exclaimed. "That's the writer's name — that or Stevenson. Stevenson it is."

"I reckon you'd better call him his Lordship," laughed the man; "them English is mighty partikerler."

"Well, I'll not be there to lord him long. Keep the traps for me; I've got to race it for dinner now."

"When'll you get them?"

"To-morrow."

I climbed the hill and ran along the river, to find considerable excitement in our kitchen; for dinner was going on inside as well as with us, and a noisy affair it seemed.

"I bet they'll be too danged fussy to live with," growled Mr. Baker.

"Ssssh!" cautioned his wife; "they'll hear you."

"Small chance," he sniffed; "listen to 'em."

There was indeed small chance, for it sounded as though a festival were going on. There'd come a peal of laughter, then a listening moment of silence, talk all at once by everybody, and then more shrieks of laughter. It seemed to me a strange way of dining, for we Adirondackers use our meal-time for eating.

The door opened once, when their servant came out to ask for something, and I got a glimpse of ladies and the sound of swift talk. It made me curious though the timidity of

the woods-bred was strong within me, and I longed to be sent in with something, yet dreaded lest I might be.

After a while, a long while after us, they finished and I was busy wiping our dishes when there came an inquiry for the pens.

"You take 'em in, Mac; my hands is all of a muss," said Mrs. Baker.

I swallowed an excuse and went. The ladies had left the dining-room and I faced a slender-bodied, thin-faced man with wide-set, smiling brown eyes, who stopped his pacing beside the table at my entrance. I remember the cigarette he had in his mouth and the spoon in his hand, and the look he shot at me, which I found strangely pleasant to meet.

"The pens at last? I'm glad you thought well, lad, to withhold them no longer." There was a playfulness in his voice that warmed his words and I felt not a bit awkward from that instant. He threw down the spoon, saying: "I thought you were going to make me write with that. They blame me enough now for furnishing soft victuals. Come in with me while I try out your fancy in pens."

"Lord!" thought I, "if this is an Englishman, why did we ever fight them?"

I followed him into that little east room where he was to do his writing, and while he sat at the desk (it is there now, that desk where I was to see him so often, and, once, so bitterly) I could not take my eyes from him, looking first at his queer vest of velveteen, then at his long hair, and the long hands that held the pens to their work with such speed, at his flowing profile, and into his black-brown eyes when he would look at me after discarding one pen upon another.

"Unaffectedly eager to work and not one of them fit," he said. "There! How can they demand letters from me at steam speed with that!" throwing down another with a whimsical oath. "I live, lad, with the postman always hot-

fast at my heels," said he, I standing by, to pick up the pens that fell.

"There's not one of them that would n't undermine the eyesight in a week," he added. "Here, let me try this," and he took up a gilt pen that had taken my eye in the store. He tried it, the point sputtering in his haste, and threw it farther than the rest, saying in his gravest voice, though I already knew enough to await the succeeding smile: "I commit the man who made, the man who sold, and the lad who brought this excruciating gilt nib, to that place where the worm never dies." Then came the smile, manly enough but yet with youth in it too, and as a white bird flutters down a dark ravine, so suddenly, so clearly, with such a thrill through me did I become aware that here before me sat a man to know. He was studying me.

"To-morrow, lad, will you take me down to the stationer's? Or where is it you buy pens in America?"

"At the hardware store, sir."

"Ah, yes! Superfluous for me to ask. These seem made to be sold there."

He lit a cigarette and I suppose I should have gone. But I could not. From no other individual before whom I had ever stood had come a fascination like this. It was an influence as vague as snow's, yet as real. Was it the humor of him or the honesty of him that had already put me on better terms with myself?

"Is it English to be so interesting?" I wondered, and when he saw me gazing so starvedly at him I was almost for speaking out.

"Lad, do you like pickles?" he inquired of me seriously.

I nodded in a funny confusion.

"Then we have something in common," he said and stretched out his hand — such a long-fingered hand that I had a hesitancy to give it a woodsman's grip. But it closed firm enough on mine.



"I must know your name," he continued. "The name of every pickle-lover is dear to me." For an instant I thought that he was ridiculing me, but his high-boned face healed the doubt with its frank pleasantness.

"Anson MacIntyre, sir."

"Anson *MacIntyre*," he repeated, writing it down with one of those accursed pens; "Anson MacIntyre. And who would have thought it in this highly vacant land — a MacIntyre!" He studied me, as if interested. "A name for adventure, lad; quite a name for adventure."

"Or for getting in a pickle," I made bold to say.

He shot another of his glances at me. "What! A pun? I must beg of you none of them. I hope to thrive on your air and I have thrived on adventure like a bluebottle in a butcher's shop. But I don't thrive on puns, Master MacIntyre. So from our subsequent conversations we will delete puns. They affect me like a combination of buttermilk and blacking. Horrid for the constitution of the language, puns. They are enough to drive a man to his shroud, puns and pens together. And you bring them both. I ask you, MacIntyre, is that a hospitable way to treat a fellow-countryman?"

"I thought you were English," I said, not a penny abashed by his humor.

"The last injustice!" he exclaimed, waving his two arms about. "Awa wi' ye to the deil for saying siccan a thing. No, my lad, I come from a countree whose principal characteristics are cold, poverty, and Scot's law, three verra puir things, but it's a gran' countree, after a'."

I told him that he had come to a country distinguished by cold, poverty, and no law at all and as grand a country as a man could wish, whereupon he started in a great conversation, suddenly breaking it off with a quaint grimace at the pens.

"Lad, lad!" he cried; "what a persuasive fellow you are! Come, clear out. I foresee that we shall converse. But now I must waive that pleasure in favor of earning a living."

And so I left the room.

I left the room, but was it I? I had gone in it chore-boy, capped and booted. I came out, my head in a cloud, my heels winged with a new ambition. I said to myself, "Can a man be like that?" It was a revelation, this disclosure of what man could be. "I foresee that we shall converse," he said to me.

"You fool!" I said to myself. "What will a great writer have to do with a farm-hand?"

And yet that afternoon, as I manipulated the obliging udders of Silky and Sulky, I dared dream into the foaming pail things that had not entered my thought before. Hitherto my longings for true comradeship had always been cast upon unreturning tides.

## CHAPTER XV

### THIN ICE HAS ITS USE

**M**Y walk with Mr. Stevenson in search of a pen of parts did not come about, for a combination of fatigue and our unusual climate put him to bed, where his wife, a diminutive presence whose extensive care was her husband's health, said that she would keep him until the sun shone. I had to groan at that, for late autumn with us is apt to be a succession of dark days, haggard with cloud, or eyeless with snow, and ever colder. But it is through this gate that we pass into our matchless winter.

However, Mrs. Stevenson put her foot down so effectually between him and the weather that I began to fear he would forget that such a person as MacIntyre the cow-milker existed. In addition, Valentine the maid, his wife, his mother—these made a feminine rampart through which no mere barn-yard boy could break, even for the purpose of carrying trays or delivering mail. Of this last there was so much that I thought if it continued to increase it would take more tackle than a mere bag to get it to and from the post-office. In one going there 'd be more letters than a brace of us Adirondackers would lick stamps to in a lifetime.

Down at the post-office people would ask me a lot about him and I acquired a mild importance from having spoken to him, a famous European being as strange to us in those days as a prongbuck would have been in the streets of London. They often stood about while the postmaster read aloud the postals that he received from three or four countries at

once. He also read the replies when they were on the open card. And later when he had got out for his walks there was much comment on his unsociability; for he did not even nod to the strangers he passed, contrary to the custom of our lonelier land.

"A cat can look at a king," said Mrs. Edwards, who was indignant at his having ignored her at some cross-roads.

"And even keep him awake nights," said her rival in the village choir, which was a very sly dig indeed, for the Edwards house was not so far from the Bakers'.

I would listen to their talk about him and hold my knowledge of him as a precious secret, though it was less knowledge than intuition, dreams, and hope. And it might easily have remained thus two parts thin air had it not been for the affair of the skates, which threw Mr. Stevenson on the scent of my romance. And Mr. Stevenson, once nose-down after a romance, was as hard to dislodge as a log in a jam. Had I known this I should never have kept mention of my Hallie from his ears so long.

The first telegram I ever sent in my life was one in which Mr. Stevenson instructed Mr. Burlingame of Scribner's to despatch him some skates. I did n't see why our skates were n't good enough for a man who spent his day in bed, did n't see until they came — glorious steel affairs which made my feet ache to try them. And this he must have guessed, for when our first big frost came he sent down word for me to borrow them, which I had a double pleasure in doing; not only to think that he had remembered me but to show off on the river such skates as nobody else had ever clamped foot to. I bolted supper that evening and went gaily out into the crackling cold.

November had set the winter going with a sudden freeze that made the trees groan and bleat to break their hearts. No snow had spoiled the ice and it ripped and boomed from bank to bank, until the river stretch was filled with a continuing

thunder. The sky was as clear and black as the ice beneath, though the stars were doing their little best to light up eternity. I nearly froze my fingers putting on the new runners and was as awkward as a plucked hen on them at first. But I soon found out the superior glide that they gave me and voyaged up-stream, where a party of young fellows and girls had built a big fire. Its heat and cheer brought us wheeling about it and we looked like moths fluttering in from the unsubstantial night.

There must have been a couple of dozen on the ice and my skates held an ovation. I was taken for granted by now in Saranac. Everybody knew that I was the son of my Ma, which did not exactly obsess them in my favor; but the fellows were all friendly toward me, and the girls, having guessed that there was a Hallie in the offing (though they scarcely could have guessed it was *she*) were well-met enough.

If I had not seen Touch and Hallie Brewster arrive a few minutes after myself, I could have been in for a jovial evening. Their coming, the sight of him putting on her skates, his assurance, the familiar laughter, the command that his sovereignty had of the simpler Saranac youths — these set me to the boil and I whisked off down-stream. And yet — while I could look at her I wanted to and in three swoopings of the skates I was back.

They were all gathered about the fire, Touch and Hallie warming up from their sleigh-ride, the rest admiring the comely couple, and all talking about my skates.

"I hear he's the large friend of Stevens the writer," Ed was saying.

"Here he is now," some one called as I sailed proudly in.

"Why, hello, MacIntyre!" said Ed, as unconcerned and apparently friendly as if there had been no bitter words and wrongs between us. "They tell me that Stevens the writer's thick for you."

"Mr. Stevenson's his name."

"But *Stevie* just between you two, I suppose," rejoined Touch, his mocking spirit edging between his teeth. "Come on, tell us about the great man."

"He knows how to buy skates," I said, taking a long roll out where the fire-glare burnished the ice.

"And I suppose you think you know how to use 'em," said my rival contemptuously. Hallie had given no sign of greeting, and now I took my first real look at her, fire-carved against the soft ebony of night, infinitely appealing to a strong man, be he stranger or old friend, then how much more desirable to me her lover! Touch had pulled out a bottle — the first I'd ever seen him have — and said, "Come, Hallie-girl, take a swig; it's a cold night."

Again my jealousy boiled at his familiarity. She refused him coldly.

"Even at that I bet I can beat you on your new-fangled runners," he said, with a touch of his old scorn.

"I'll race you," I cried, confident, and eager to beat him in the presence of Hallie.

"What'll you bet?"

"Anything likely."

"Bet me the skates."

At this the others laughed and pressed interestedly in.

"I can't. They're Mr. Stevenson's. He's just lent them to me."

"Oh, Steve'll buy you others if you lose." The old devil crowded in Touch's voice and again the crowd laughed. Touch took another pull of the bottle. I caught a glimpse of Hallie, breaking from the group and circling out into the dusk, back to the firelight, out into the dark, and the sight of her took my good sense. Anything to humble Touch, to harvest some regard from her! And so I cried, quite contrary to the wisdom that was in me: "All right, Touch, I'll race you to the old pine at the point. I'll bet you the skates against a ride home with the girl you brought."

At this a quick roar of laughter came from all the fellows and girls, weaving in and out of the fire-glow like gilded bats. All laughed but Hallie, who came up before us, indignant. She put her hand on his arm (which gnawed me with jealousy to see), nor looked once at me (which filled me with other burnings) and I could see that she was as angry at him as at myself, if it was anger. There is something in being raced for that even your classic ladies did not spurn.

"Take your places," shouted young Horton. "Let 'em race, Hallie."

With the blood pumping in my ears I bent beside the taller youth. But what if his legs were the longer, mine were the steadier! And I was racing for a word with Hallie. She had whirled away like a partridge and at the smack of Horton's palms we were off and after her.

Have you ever raced, on black ice, beneath a jeweled sky, for love?

I soon drew ahead of him, winging down the stream, uplifted by the flow of air past me and by my coming pleasure. Fainter came Touch's ring and roar as he struck out deep notes from the ice behind. On I tore through the half-mystical dusk of stars, around the curve, around the next, and in sight of the great pine, looming ahead to welcome.

In two minutes I should win, in twenty have a ride with Hallie. The thought of it raised me above the ice. I saw the pine, I felt the air, I knew I skated, but all these insensibly. I passed her, and I called, my imagination trembling to her and not staying to watch the balance of my body: a vicious black-snake of a stick frozen in the ice fanged me. I swerved, knew a sickening sprawl along the surface, heard a guffaw from the other as he passed. I felt no bruise, no hurt, only the dawning pain of disappointment, only the bitter solace of her call, "Are you hurt?"

"Yes," I had the wit to say. "Come here."

She circled to me and I rose, pretending the cripple.

"You should n't have bet Mr. Stevenson's skates, Mac."

"Closer," I said, but she divined some lightness in my voice and was wary and I jumped to catch her. If I was to lose her and heaven as well, I must have three words and one sweet clasp of her. At my leap she gave a tremulous laugh and darted off, I after.

"Look out, I'm after you!" I called to her, and she, answering with a curious cry, whether of dismay I know not, fled duskily before me.

Oh! What a run was that! She floated down the night as lightly as the fluff of seeding weeds before September winds, I edging her off from any turning, calling to her to make her glide the faster. I fixed my game, which was to maintain her fear of my catching her, which I saw to it should never entirely happen. The farther she was from her friends, the better I should like it. At the worst we would have the skate back together.

.On we went, between the darkness of wooded banks, slower now when I judged she needed a breath, faster when my approach quenched what fatigue she may have felt. Over a mile we flew, she wraith-like, silent, the dear ghost of all I cared for. As for myself, I felt infamously happy at the joy within my grasp, the joy of gliding but one stride faster, of coming up to her, of saying even the least of the things that surged within me. Our speed long since had purified me of chagrin, the ice-keen air had filled me with a recklessness I had not felt with her before. She must have felt it instinctively, for she tried to wheel, to pass, went too close to the shore, plopped into an air-hole, fell, though not so deep in the water, and that for an instant only, as I had her in my arms.

For one moment of clear stars, heaving bosoms, and infinite close silence I held her; and I am sorry for those who cannot know such joy. Then came the awakening to her plight. Wet to the knees and in that temperature, I knew that five



minutes would see her toes frozen black. It was but a step to the bank, a moment to find a little cove sheltered by small firs, a minute to have a dead one lighted, and two more before I had a body of heat from a heap of bank-wood and small branches.

"You must take off whatever's wet," I said, trying not to show my exultation.

"I can't stay here."

"Here, and this instant. They're ice now." I glowed to see her obey, even if somewhat uncertainly.

"Shoes, stockings, everything that's wet," I commanded, rather harshly, to conceal the joy I had. I peeled my sweater from me, saying, "Put a leg down each arm of it, and these mittens on your feet."

And then I wheeled off for more wood, lest she be more modest than obedient.

When I returned, there she was sitting, quite radiant with flame-light, studying her mittened feet, which peeped from the bottoms of my sweater sleeves. Somehow there was nothing to say, nothing to start with, I mean, from the whole brush-pile of things aching to be said and we both looked steadily into the up-tonguing flames, the stillness of the cold at our backs, the luxurious quick glow in our faces.

Whatever was passing within her was hard to read with less than a stare and I was always looking around up-stream for fear that Touch might whirl around the bend and spoil it all. But soon I could withstand it no longer and asked, "What're you so silent for, Hallie?"

"I was thinking," she said.

"Does it hurt to be such a powerful thinker?" I was attempting wit.

"I was thinking why I'm always unhappy after I'm with you."

She still gazed into the fire.

"That's nothing to what I am *until* I'm with you."

"So if we're unhappy both before and after, we'd better not try." She smiled at me.

"Try what?"

"To be together."

"If that's what comes of thinking, I wish you would n't think," I said.

Suddenly, as if under the guidance of one of those unintelligible impulses which seem to divert women so much, she began removing my clothes from her. I stooped to stop her. She persisted. I insisted, kneeling on the bank as any old-time courtier might have knelt to his lady love, though I've never heard of one trying to keep his sweater on his lady's ankles.

"Hallie," I exclaimed, "ever since that first day we've been at cross-purposes, like a crow and a grackle."

"I wonder why. But you've forbade me to think."

"You have n't wanted to say a word to me or give a civil ear to the things that crowd my lips to say."

"Your lips!—" she exclaimed hotly; "that belong to another!"

"They do not."

"Then you don't know what belonging means. I wish I would n't have spoken to them now." And she did turn partly away. It brought her profile against the dark, so clear-cut, so firm, so sweet that no other fellow (I thought) had ever been forced to confront such a combination of desirability and refusal.

"They are as unacquainted with others' as yours are," I said deliberately.

"How dare you," she exclaimed, turning toward me, her eyes gloriously blazing, "when Dad and I saw you with her in the road!"

"But not kissing her."

"But she was in your arms. Oh, I cannot say—" She bent away, and faced the dark, her hair a rough crescent of

gold benesth her tam-o'-shanter. How I managed just not to crumple her up in my arms I do not know. Neither did I then know woman and the outward deception of her desires.

"Hallie," I cried, now downright unhappy, "let me have three words and I'll not torment you further."

But she gave no motion, no syllable, and I pushed the logs together. The sparks rushed up into the night as futilely as my desires of love groped for response from my beloved. If she would n't listen I would talk to the fire.

"Fire," I said, "when a fellow wants more than anything else to be straight with the girl he — he likes, and she won't listen, but goes out driving with another fellow, and perhaps let him warm up her hands when she's cold —" (This was one of Tess's inventions.)

"I never did!" Her exclamation came so abruptly that I jumped a mite but, seeing my advantage, kept on talking to the fire:

"Anyways, I've seen her with him, and knowing him for the kind who's not going to be *discourteous* to a girl if her hands is cold —"

"Oh, but you are mean! I hate you!" she cried, stripping the sweater from her. A vehement pleasure took me brutally by the throat.

"I don't see why it is, fire," I said; "I don't see how a girl can blame me for talking to you, when I can't to her and have got to talk *or* bust. She'd better keep on that sweater — don't you think? — for even if the stockings is dry, the shoes ain't."

"I'm going anyway. Give me the shoes."

"No, ma'am, you're not," said I, wheeling; "you'll have to trust me till your caretaker comes."

Silence. Did I fancy half a sob from her?

"Fire," I continued, "I guess we'd better talk about Touch, that marvelous man, a while."

"I hate you!" she said again.

"But Touch — he —"

"Oh! I hate him, too!"

An upheaping relief kindled in my breast, but I kept on with the fire:

"If she would say that just *once* again!"

"I advise her not to," said the voice of Touch, the length of him rising from the darkness behind us. We both started as guiltily as if we'd been caught at worse, and I had for the first time in my life the sudden happiness of sharing something with her, if only the bogus guilt of a mild love-making; and a precious sweet sharing it was.

"It distresses me to disturb you two," he said, appearing his old Satanic self, "but I'd like from you, MacIntyre, the skates I won; and from you, Hallie, some sign of getting dressed."

He had a humiliating forbearance about him and the price of my foolishness struck home. I knew he would exact the debt. I feared that this misadventure would estrange the tiny understanding between Mr. Stevenson and me. Misery assailed me and I looked at Hallie for sympathy and fancied that I found it in her earnest glance at Ed.

"Come, come, take them off," he was saying; "they'll make a splendid souvenir of a splendid evening. Proud to have a souvenir of a great man like your friend Stevens."

"I'll buy them back from you, Touch, at any price," I said, hoping for some way of evading Mr. Stevenson's contempt.

"The devil you will! I want those. You're so thick with him that you'll be able to get another pair offn his Greatness. Why, he'll be afraid to inquire for these. He'll say, 'Ah, well! 'T is the price I must pay for being friends to a handsome young harumscarum like Mac here.'"

His sarcasm was paired to his impish smile and for a brief second I thought that he could not be in earnest, but he continued sourly:

"Come on, MacIntyre; you're not in a great hurry to pay your debts of honor."

"Not to eavesdroppers," I muttered, stooping to unclasp the shining steel.

"That's right. Crawl out of your bargain on a bellyful of words."

"I've never crawled yet," said I, tossing a skate to him, "not even to listen to a man and his girl talking."

He bit his lip. "A man? There's nothing I enjoy so much as a joke, Mac." He said it to rile me and with the same intent I whispered to him, "Unless it be a girl."

"There's some things a man does n't stoop to," he said, quickly.

"Or crawl to," I added, flinging him the other skate.

"You're catching real wit from your writer friend," he sneered. "Don't catch so much of it you'll be beyond talking to us ordinary people."

He adjusted the skates to his feet, letting his fall at mine, with, "Want mine to go home on? It's quite a walk alone."

He took another drink from his bottle. "Come on, Hallie."

"She is not going with a drunken driver, I guess, nor yet without her shoes." I felt to see how dry they were. "I'll see her home if you're in a hurry."

"Like hell you will! Hurry up, Hal. Your people'd like us to turn up soon, I guess. Put 'em on."

His scorn of everybody, his patronizing tone to her, together with the loss of the skates, drove me into a dull fury. I failed to see why she said nothing, why she took his impudence. I did not credit her with half the control that she had. Yet, when I knelt to put on her shoes, he having gone out on the ice to try my skates, I found her trembling.

"Won't you let me see you home?" I said low.

"I can't. It would only make matters worse for me."

"Then matters are bad?"

"He is beginning to drink."

"But your father —"

"Likes him. There, I have told you too much," and she began to help with the other shoe. Touch was swinging up and down in front of us, reciting in a singsong voice some absurd rhyme about me.

"Listen, Mac, I'll say it over. How do you like this:

"I love Mr. Stevens,  
His skates is so fine;  
He lent 'em to Macky,  
But now they are mine."

Then came the crash, the long shivering, crystal noise of ice spinning across ice, followed by the rip and boom of angry oaths. He had fallen into the air-hole, that air-hole over which thin ice had formed since Hallie's immersion. A loud laugh burst from me, and Hallie was not through shaking with mirth when he appeared before the embers, dripping from the waist down, and calling us desperate names, as if we had planned the affair deliberately. Those names he called us put us into that sweet confederacy again and an injudicious deviltry of humor possessed me.

"Take 'em off, Ed; take 'em off! They're unlucky skates. I suppose you *crawled* out." He wrung out some profanity upon me.

"Hallie and I are going now. Her people'd like us to turn up soon." Oh, but it was sweet seeing him writhe, getting colder each minute!

"Don't you stir an inch, girl!" he thundered.

"I can't stay here while you undress," she said.

"Come on, Hallie," I said, pulling at her arm. She had risen and was regarding him. I was sorry to throw her into such an open choice, but I coveted minutes with her, particularly when they were to be snatched from him. She

looked very beautiful as she stood there, the light of the dying fire kissing her open features with its flickering charms.

"Take your seat!" he shouted to her.

"It is kinder to let him change his clothes," I said. "Come, we're off."

As if in great trouble she wrung her hands. "I will go alone," she cried. "Nobody shall go with me!" and started off. I shadowed her, Touch with one shoe and one sock off, fuming by the fire, watching us disappear into the darkness with heaven knows what obliterating oaths.

In a couple of seconds I had caught up with her. She stopped abruptly — it was beneath Orion, I remember, with the wide circle of intoxicating night about us two — and said, "Mac, are you there?"

It was the first time in the world that she had called me that, and I would have done anything in my life for the sound of it again.

"If you really want to do as I like, Mac, you will not come one step further." It was now I who was plunged into the trouble of decision.

"Why?" I asked like any school-boy. "Why not?"

"You must mind my wish."

"Call me 'Mac' again." There was a pause, as if a tide were wavering in the viewless streams of her fancies, and then it must have set my way, for she said it again and very sweetly and again I wanted to clasp her to me but was afraid of imperiling my gains.

"It must be that always from now on, Hallie."

"Yes, if you like — Mac."

"And now can't I have that ride home?"

"Your race decided that. But there is one thing undecided. Don't you want to take those skates back to Mr. Stevenson?"

"I don't want anything — but one thing — so much."

She laughed a little at that. "Then, silly boy, go back

and trade your trousers for them. Ed needs dry trousers; you need the skates."

A solution certainly. "But then he will have that drive and not me."

"You can't have it anyway, and does it matter so much when *we* are friends?"

"And can I come out to your place again?"

"Perhaps, if you mind now."

"Oh, Hallie! do you mean it?"

"Don't you see," she replied, "how important it is for you and Mr. Stevenson not to quarrel?"

I tried to follow her with my mind and memorize the scene at the same time. "He must be a fine man and a good friend to you," she was saying.

"Fine!" I echoed. "Just wait till you —"

She broke off my dream with a little push toward Touch. "Take them to him or you won't have a chance."

"When can I come out?" I was bewitched by her presence.

"When they're dry," she said, laughing. "That's your only excuse." And she was gone.

In a welter of uprisen emotions I went back to the fire. He had pushed the logs together and was holding his trousers steamingly near them.

"She is waiting for you, or at least expects you to catch up with her."

"Good of you to bring the message. I'll try to remember these little kindnesses. Tantalize me some more." His clear eyes drank in the firelight and yet were undivulging still to me.

"I'm not trying to tantalize you. I've brought you some dry pants."

He looked up at that, the fire bronzing his face into something of the gallant boldness that had held my glance that first night in the saloon. "For the skates?"



I nodded and he pondered the offer.

"She's on her way home and 'll naturally take the sleigh if you don't race for it. I can afford to dry yours here; you can't."

"I understand that perfectly," he said, "but I'm still a little dense on the other. First you're hell-bent on seeing her home. Now you're not." He was waylaid in thought. "Anyway, I guess I'll take the pants. Sorry she throwed you over." It was all sarcasm.

"You might as well know now that she did n't. And you might as well begin now to choose other company for your night parties. I ain't going to have Hallie going off with you and a pocket flask."

He stopped, one leg in the air ready for its pant-leg, in utter astonishment. "By the Almighty! You ain't, ain't you? And who's to stop me?" I picked up his damp trousers and held them up to dry. "You, I suppose. I see anybody stopping Ed Touch from what he wants! You did n't stop my living at Strawberry Farm, did you? Why, kid, you're a mere baby with the women, let alone with us men, and she — well, I guess she'll oblige me any time I want."

"You lie!" I cried. "She's a good girl."

"She is," he said, "because I choose it. I'll marry no other."

"You'll never marry her."

He made no reply, but leaned over, fixed his skates, cast a last glance at mine, prepared to go, and then said, "Is that final?" in a voice tantalizingly calm. I said nothing, so he went on with a laugh, all Ed: "Why, come to think of it, kid, I think I'll go back and make up to her in your own pants." And with another laugh he was gone.

Even his parting word did not trouble me too much. I had made a beginning at last and that despite the fact that he was daily on the ground. So while I stood there by my little comfortable blaze till the trousers dried sufficiently for

me to skate home in them unharmed my fancy rehearsed the tumultuous happinesses of the evening.

Our winter stillness is the very soul of rapture. An hour later I glided up-stream in a transfigured contentment beneath the arch of heaven that blazed with its distant fires. What beauty there was when one had eyes to see it! The dim curves of the river, the dark of the ice, the graspless velvet of the forest aisles leading into the unknown — never before had these seemed so satisfying.

And what a manly satisfaction filled me as I crawled into my bed! "At last!" was my last thought. And when I slept it was to see that final picture of her standing there, half yielding, half obdurate, outlined against the darkland of my dreams.

## CHAPTER XVI

### WE LAY THE SIEGE OF TROY

THE clear cold held for several days, cloudless and still, as if winter had got through with all the bustle of moving in and was able now to settle down and enjoy itself. And it looked as if Mr. Stevenson would, too, for the very next afternoon he came out to the barn and asked me for the skates — proving what a narrow margin Fate had given me — and asking whether I could spare an hour to accompany him on the river.

"God's larks, but this is fine!" he exclaimed when he had got the first full breath of our outdoors. "God's larks! *This* after supping sawdust in your New York city!" He was as excited as a man putting on his fishing-togs for the first time in the season.

"Inimitably fine, Mac! After digging the rubbish out of one's seven wits for an interminable morning a man needs a little of this whisky which you serve with your air."

"Teacher told us about places where it's always hot as a kitchen," I said. "Is it true?"

"True as tripe, my lad, and an especial dream of mine. Ever since my natal winds of Edinburgh divided the marrow so damnably in my joints I've been looking for a climate that would steam it together, some pampering latitude like the South Seas, where all you do is study oratory and etiquette and catch the fruits as they fall from the trees. If this is a sample of your winterliness, it is n't bad. But I don't like my cold administered with a twelve-knot wind."

"It's always calm when it is really cold."

"Splendid, MacIntyre!" he said, as if I had completed the weather arrangements to his satisfaction; "and don't let it get too shrill. This thing of having the devil using the chimneys for his penny whistle is audibly annoying to me. So don't let it happen." I promised him.

For a person who was not born presumably with his skates on he was graceful and deft beyond anything I had seen. Although so slenderly put together, he seemed master of all his joints, taking one turn after another with a sensitiveness of poise that would have matched the flight of our sharp-winged sparrow-hawk had he been in air. I had to admit that he was far more able on his winged runners than any of us Adirondackers who had eaten, slept, and dreamt skating from our bottle days.

"I'm a mere clown to some, Mac," he said in response to my admiration. "Please remember I spent a winter in Switzerland once, where the poorest of them could rightly have commended me to the beginner's corner. And they did it, too. I'm still shy from trying to accommodate myself to their manners."

And, to my astonishment, I found that he was not joking, that he was shy. Many a time he would stop short at the approach of a passer-by, as finical as a girl who wants to show off a little less than she dares, and wait until all danger of his attention was past. Even I had to watch his dexterities with no more than a three-quarter eye or forfeit the sight.

That afternoon we drifted little by little down the river, a low wind curling our ice-shavings ahead of us. The ice was so clear and black that it seemed like teasing Providence to trust it, yet so smooth as to tickle one's fancy to progressive delights. So almost without noticing it we came to the scene of my last night's adventure and like the open-mouthed animal that I was, in a jig's time I had told him all about it, the wager with his skates, my progress with Hallie, Touch's threatening departure. So much had his sympathetic ear

dragged from me, and only when I had come back to the wager did I hesitate to look into his eyes for fear of finding them accusing. His first words startled me:

"I could n't have forgiven you, Mac —" he said in a tone that I took for serious, and stopped, musing.

"It was a poor thing to do," I said, "to bet your only pair."

"I could n't have forgiven you, Mac, if you had n't," he said, smiling, and thawing my fears with the warm brown of his steady glance; "could n't have forgiven you if you'd been sucked into the drains of prudence! Prudence! Bah! What is it? Old age, lad, nothing more. It's the fine thing about youth that it will wager its own life or some one else's skates while the fervor is on. Did you get your ride?"

My relief at his comradely turn was so genuine that frankness opened my heart and while we skated on I told him much more, laying open to him my store of hopes, which seemed scanty enough in the bare daylight. He listened to my plans, my aspirations and despairs, crying out at some sign of faint-heart that I had made: "Hide despair, lad! Clamp it down. Despair is sacred and must be kept hidden in the heart. Now you are getting on familiar ground."

"Did you ever despair, sir?" It did not seem possible to me.

"Why, lad, despair was the only emotion that would address me, for days at a time! Only lately has it become the fashion for the public to acknowledge my endeavors. And I had a very naked time of it before the fashion came in. Indeed, there were whole years when I had about determined that I was less meant for letters than to keep a baked-potato stall. But I would not acknowledge it, even to myself. I'd 've rather let my little spark go out in the dumbest sort of eternal night than voice the thought."

"I'll put the clamps on despair from this moment," I said, laughing.

"Then I foresee that this Hallie will become Mrs. Mac-Intyre."

"And will you help a little?" I asked, hoping he would let me show her to him, him to her.

"Help? Why, most damnably!" he shouted gaily. "R. L. S., the Matchless Match-maker! Most excellent! The more doddering we grow the keener we are about these things, Mac. I'll court and contrive like a maiden lady."

We continued in the highest spirits a while. I was so exalted with his humor and my hopes that I never noticed the distance until we had turned to find the breeze before which we had floated so feather-wise had become brisk and biting to the face and likely to balk his strength of much result against it. I skated before him, trying to break its hold upon him, looking back occasionally to find him struggling on, a little gray in the face, yet with always some jest on his lips: "I'm coming, Mac, in my mild old foolish way!" or "You're lucky to have a bag that holds you so efficiently!" or "Oh, for a body that is n't always at odds with itself and owner!"

Despite his stanch cheerfulness his strokes grew feebler and when he had got back to that place of my last night's fire I suggested another to warm and befriend him while I went for a toboggan on which to pull him home. He said that Providence had despatched me into the world to some purpose, and also that while I was flown he would ponder on plans for the besiegement of Strawberry Farm.

And flying was the word for my errand-speed. I was soon back with the toboggan, some buffalo robes, and, by way of inspiration, a tea-pot. I surprised him sitting almost in the blaze in the half-bent posture of those who think, and the lean figure against the gold of the late afternoon made a picture of loneliness in that open solitude. But if it was loneliness, at least there was no sadness in his greeting and soon he displayed a child's glee in the comfort of the tea-party — comfort, as he said, snatched from the open mouth

of winter. And our talk ranged from the makes of skates to the stars . . .

Reluctantly we poked the fire apart and made ready to leave. I was lost in thinking over the night before and wondering whether he had concocted any plans for getting me rid of Touch, when he purposely tried to confuse me, saying: "Confess it, Mac—don't you find me a trifle dull, talking about stars when you'd prefer the subject woman? Why should I be dragging in eternity when what you want to consider is a good time?"

"If you are dull, sir, then everybody else is dead."

"How'd you learn to talk?" he said, brightening.

"Listening," I said.

"I thought you were n't," he laughed; "and, anyway, I would n't have cared," he added quite untruthfully. "But I insist that instead of those matters of eternity and the like you want me to tell you what I've thought out about the coming conquest of Hallie. Don't deny it, lad."

I did n't deny it, being restlessly curious.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "We already understand each other. I see that you have n't bothered learning to avoid the truth in conversation. Now that I am great, as the silly word goes, I find people jockeying up and down their conversation to find the most flattering way of approach. It is sickening, Mac, to discover with what precaution people address me, pick their words, flatter and twitter. Such infinite silliness! And it leads to my non-comprehension of them, and that to condemnation damned quick. So speak out to me, lad, when you have something to say. I am of age and can doubtless bear it."

How it heartened me, this atmosphere of equality that he clothed our conversation in! It made me mighty. I tucked him down on the toboggan and with his skates on my feet again had no trouble in assuming some speed, while he commended my powers from time to time. Indeed, no beast of

burden was ever lightened of his toil by such jests as pricked the labor of my pulling, which was scarcely labor on that flawless surface. But he refused to disclose his plans about Hallie yet, only comforting me with such exclamations as, "We'll win her, lad; we'll win her or perish with the human sweat still on us." And again he said: "I'll wager that those eyes of yours will have their way with the missing rib yet, or the jade has no taste for the affections."

As we went up the slope from the river to the house — indeed, across the very meadow in which I had once sat so disconsolate in the rain, little dreaming this experience — he said: "I'm an artist by nature, lad, and there's a bit of woman in every artist, and the woman in me says that Hallie's clean daft if she does n't agree with her."

"Well?" I said, wondering what he meant.

"The man in me forbids it being put any stronger," he said, with a grave tenderness in his voice that seemed to match the last violet glow of day. "But I'll say this: I warrant you a wife."

"It must be Hallie," I said, laughing.

"It shall be," he replied, as if she were a bit of cake all done but the cutting. "Now fly to your milking and I'll rush in and plot out a campaign for us to fight by."

I went to the milking, exhilarated, challenged, his electric humor flashing and charging me with an invincible might. Of course Hallie would be mine, despite a regiment of Touches! How much I might have done already if I had known what I could do! He was forever making me feel that life was a blossoming out. How much the Saranac Lakers were missing by not knowing him! What unguessed loss to them that he was too shy to be seen and they too awkward to see! And did I know him? I had never read a word that he had written; and as I realized that, I determined to correct it.

When the chores were through I stole by the window of his little room where he was writing by lamplight, writing,



writing ("The Lantern Bearers" for Mr. Burlingame, he told me it was); and then I begged a book of his from his mother, who seemed pleased at my asking and gave me "Treasure Island."

It was the first book that I had ever read aside from those old geographies at school, and night after night I would steal away into my room with it and an apple and when I shut the door and opened the covers to it I was instantly in another world. I had never seen the sea, but I saw it now, I had never known a pirate (except loggers) and I knew them now, and the night I came to Jim Hawkins's hiding in the barrel I felt a certain relief, thinking, "If he could get Jim out of that scrape I guess he can plan some way to nab Hallie away from Touch." This made it easier for me to wait until he should disclose his plan.

For a week, however, it was as if I did n't exist. He was deep in his writing and an author is no person to disturb at his labors. Mostly he kept indoors or walked only on the porch and hardly nodded when I passed. I kept on borrowing his books from his mother, saying nothing to him about it, and as I found out how different a Mr. Stevenson there was in each one I began to wonder if the man he was would remember at all the man he had been to me.

It was the first of December, when I carried a huge pile of bills to him, that he again talked to me as if we had had no break in the conversation of the outdoor tea-party.

"How much are you earning?"

I told him.

"How much are you able to lay aside for wedded life and your earthly future?"

I explained about things at home and Tess and the apparently hopeless state of my financial operations, adding that I would continue to work.

"Man, man!" he exclaimed. "That is all very well; work is all very well, but you should n't go at it in such a narrow-

viewed, knotless sort of fashion." He held up another bill and opened it with a sigh, adding: "You may be thankful you don't live in New York, where it costs you a pound to sneeze and fifty to blow your nose.

"And winning a wife," he went on as if he had n't interrupted himself, "is managed in much the same manner. Walking in upon a comfortably organized family, detaching a girl from it who has been used to the security of a sound financial association, and offering her a chance to do a day's labor every day for the rest of her perilous life requires a very superior brand of affection to succeed in. Particularly if you have a rival who is nearly as handsome and much nearer home."

I admitted the difficulties of my situation.

"Have you thought about your work?"

When he found that I had not he continued: "There is one thing I like in you particularly, Mac — your frankness. There is hope yet when one knows how to tell the truth; particularly to oneself concerning the same. It enables a man to divine what is in him, which is of importance, and makes it easier for him to be taught by others what is outside of him. That's the proper order, I believe. Know yourself, and then know one other thing to the bottom, and then, if there's any room left, fill in with your smatterings. Otherwise what are you? A vane in the wind. And a vane, I don't need to admonish you, points manywheres but arrives at none."

I reminded him that I was pointing steadily enough.

"I congratulate you on that, Mac. A wife is a destiny, and many a destiny has been decided by the first pretty face on the opposite side of the street. But if you're going to catch up with your destiny, Mac, you must accelerate. Earning three dollars a week and spending or, rather, owing, three and a half, is ambiguous progress, as any commercial academy will tell you."

I offered myself freely for advice.

"War, MacIntyre!" he cried eagerly, rising, and walking up and down the vacant room. "You must fight. You are fit for much, but to know what it is we must consider much. We must have a council of war. We will begin a campaign that shall go under the general heading, 'Conquest of Hal-lie.' You shall constitute that military ensemble called an army. I will be your consulting general. Does that idea pain your imagination to conceive?"

His enthusiasm would have fired a stone-pile and mine evidently pleased him, for he stopped in his walking to call out: "We'll win her! Mac, you're a lad a-reach for my heart! I guarantee you victory. Now this is the acknowledged way to dispose of feminine opposition: Treat your woman as an opposing army — equally strong, Mac, equally strong — or a citadel, anything very impregnable and fortress-like. Then you can visualize and plan a capture according to the best models. Have you read Cæsar? Of course not. Nor Virgil? Oh, Mac! Mac! If I were only going to live in this hyperborean desert ten years and give up writing entirely, you might come into a little education."

It was then I let him know that "Kidnapped" was interfering with my usefulness as chore-boy. He seemed gratified. "I'd rather have heard you say that, Mac, than have a column in the 'Athenæum.' I believe you're alive. You breathe, you love, you live, you measure out your two parts of drudgery against your one part bliss and courageously drink it down! That is being a man, according to my definition. I begin to like you like the devil, lad. We'll put this through or my name is Bilgewater. If you had only read Virgil, though!"

And he broke off then and there to tell me the story of the Trojan Horse, and for an hour I lived in the midst of chariot combat, of cries from the high-walled city, of the strategy of the great Ulysses, of smoking Troy, but especially

of Ulysses. And for another hour we discussed the ways of ridding me of my rival. "But we have been discussing subterfuges only, MacIntyre, mere spokes of the wheel, forgetting the hub. The hub of the whole matter is steadfastness. If Touch deserted you, may he not desert her? Or, even worse, turn traitor to his infatuation? Be steadfast, not only to Hallie but to yourself, and the flag of Anson MacIntyre will sometime wave over a capitulation. It took me a couple of continents, an intervening ocean and a year's sickness to bring my lady to heel. And you have seen yours just four times!"

"Five!" I said.

"Steadfastness! Perpetual devotion is the word to weave into if not on the banner, my dear fellow-in-arms. Unfortunately perpetual devotion to a woman means perpetual neglect of everything else. But true love is a bargain at that."

I interrupted his rhapsody with a nod.

"But now for the campaign. There is but one method of procedure: besiege, attack, retreat, then attack again and ever more besiege — and the most superior of the sex will yield to your aspirations."

I acknowledged the wisdom in these measures.

"In the last resort, Mac, it does not depend on rules but on your mother's son, does your final success, and somewhat on his mother. Consulting generals and experience and the rules of war — all are futile if you are not the person. You must be the person, pulling yourself up by your own boot straps. Now tell me about your mother."

There were two ways that Mr. Stevenson had of treating a matter, either to shove it down the wind with the breath of immediate anger or to laugh it out of the way. Yet he did not laugh when I had told or yet break out into wrathful statements. In fact, he swallowed my mother complete, Tess, baby and all; and I was a little cast down that my confidences should be taken so lukewarmly, when about ten days later a

circumstance matured which showed that he had been a whole family of little strategies beneath that long black hair. And the birth of the family was funny enough.

It was one of those disputable afternoons that we sometimes get in early December when one is not sure that earth has changed into heaven or not: an afternoon of magic warmth in the sun, of cloudless mountains jutting into shoreless skies, with no wind, the snow a ripple of flame in the sun or a pool of blue in the shade—in short, an afternoon when all the senses cried out their most exquisite satisfactions. It was an afternoon to fly along white miles of perfect ice and Mr. Stevenson had in fact called me to skate with him and we were collecting our things in the living-room when from the window I caught sight of that now familiar plague descending upon us—a delegation of admirers.

Flattery is but a sentimental sop at the best, and not worth the time it takes to swallow it if there be skating on hand, and we were both very glum over the impending calamity.

"Fanny," Mr. Stevenson called to his wife, "if you can't keep these people off, Mac and I drop our professions and take up clerical life or something less romantic."

"Take to your bed," she calls back; "you can be ill."

"But they will see me skating."

"Hide."

"But they will insist on tea."

"Let us go," I said; "there they are at the gate."

But he was unable, not having his skating shoes fastened. "Fanny, make haste, or I shall have no further use for ideas. Recall your Shakespeare. They carried out *Falstaff* in the laundry basket. But we never have anything washed."

"Duck!" I said. "They're on the porch. I'll fetch the rest." And in a fever of haste he drops on all fours, creeps past the sill's vision on hands and knees, rises to the rear window that I have open for him, and is out of it like any school-boy with a rhubarb pie. I follow with sweater, ear

tabs, muffler, and kindred accoutrements. We slink into the stable to complete the dressing.

"They undermine my digestion," he complained lightly, "these depressing praise-mongers. Six weeks I've had of it now. Listen to them. Hear them howling over my works, five or six of them in full cry over a single adjective. Listen to them! — grown women going into paroxysms of pathetic joy because I chose to write with a pencil instead of a pair of tongs." Indeed, a full-lunged gabble from ladies came through the still open window.

"Let us fly," he said and, half crouching, we ran down the hill. Out of sight of the house he paused, breathing hard. "Don't misunderstand me, Mac, I love praise. It is the substance that we artists feed on. But that," and he waved an expressive mittened hand at the distant parlor, "that thing of descending on a helpless man in shrieking packs with a kind of seraphic agony on their faces, when it's really to see whether he dresses in a velvet jacket as the pictures say and to compute when he last cut his hair—" He broke off with a little oath. "By George, they win! The ladies win. We've forgotten the skates!"

To be sure, we had left them in the room. We could not skate, we could not stand still, nor yet go home. Walking the streets of Saranac in '87 was a fairly prosaic pleasure; so drawn, I suppose, unconsciously by thoughts of Hallie, we turned our steps along the lake road and out her way, when, coming in sight of Ma's house, I colored and stopped short.

"Have you seen a weird?" he asked, laughing over his fur collar.

I stumbled along with some confusion in my answer, and he soon had the truth from me; and as swiftly as a panther leaps down on a doe's back he had pounced on an idea.

"As your consulting general and a romancer on my own account, I'm going to conduct a little preliminary operation to the Conquest."

He would have made a general look slack beside him, so surely did he plot out the skirmish and order me about.

"Kindly delete yourself from the scene, Mac. Hide there in that fir clump. I shall not be long and I'll report you word for word what happens."

With an energetic wave from him we were separated and after I'd disposed myself where the level sun glanced from the needles of the balsam upon my neck I watched him grow smaller down the road, mount the stoop, and soon enter the hateful house, my heart closing at the thought of what he might find therein.

It is a cold business for the heart — waiting — particularly when all the blood has run to the head to help that poor member conjecture the unconjecturable. I sat in my covert while the sun fell and the keel of a solitary cloud caught fire, and burned, and sank, all hands (angel) being lost. There was left me only the crystal nothing above, and below not much more, and I wondered what my general was doing.

At length he materialized upon the stoop and had soon caught up with me and I sought his face for some clue. It was very stern and very gray with fatigue. I longed for him to put his arm about my shoulder, for I felt so lonely, but I suppose that would have been less Scotch than he could be. He plunged into the affair with, "I did not carry off the skirmish too brilliantly, lad. Yet there is this to report: I took your mother by surprise, I carried her defenses by storm, and I shelled that word 'safe' without mercy. I took Tess prisoner and shall get her a place to work in some neighboring town. And parting, I raked them both with volleys of the truth. The result is, lad, that you will have to pay no more board and all your earnings can go to campaign expenses against the Conquest."

"What do you mean by 'shelled' the word 'safe'?" I asked, not being too well grounded in his military lingo.

" 'T was ammunition you gave me, Mac. For your mother to keep the girl 'safe' was her part of the bargain. Tess's safety was the commodity that you were paying for. And how did she do it? By appointing male ruffians to guard her, by seeing to it that she should not be exposed to solitude by day or the dangers of loneliness by night. They even protected her in bed. Safety? The same sort that the cat prepares for the mouse. I declared the deal off."

"And did n't Ma rear up?" I asked.

"I'd reined her in by her own confession first. It was a disgusting preamble and I'm sorry, Mac. But this I promise you: she will not touch Hallie."

I expressed my gratitude as well as words might, coming from a heart two thirds broken. The solicitude that Mr. Stevenson's mother continually showed for her son was as light to the shadow of my homelife, and hurt a hundred times a day. And now I mentioned it.

"All one's props rarely collapse together, Mac," he said, turning a fatherly glance on me, "though it is hard sometimes to see them. But doubtless when your mother ran off you found an avenue opened to something larger, did n't you?"

"I found my father and the heart of the woods," I said.

"And when you had outgrown your father?"

"I found my first friend."

"And when Touch went back on you?"

"I put my hand in Hallie's," I cried, brightening.

"And now?"

"My other is in yours!"

"I pray that mine will never fail you," he said in deep earnestness; and as we strode through the silence-hung, soft twilight of the day, each in a mellow silence of his own, I thought how strange is life that out of misery blooms a flower transcending all the past. Certainly, at this sign of his friendship, I was filled with a more permeating joy than had ever possessed me.



As we neared the village I asked him how he came to think of this story-book sort of skirmish against an unknown woman and he said:

"What's the use of being a romancer, lad, if you don't make your life a romance too, and the best of all? Dreams make an admirable pattern for daily living, and each enchantment that one brings true invigorates one for a still higher effort. Life is a poor thing, I am more and more convinced, without an art that always waits for us; but compared with life my art is such a poor hobbledohoy, parading limpingly over paper, that when it has a chance to stroll aside into real life I welcome that chance."

Lights shone from the Bakers' windows as we mounted the lane. He walked draggingly, but I almost buoyantly as a subtle exultation crept upward through my distress. As imperceptibly as summer turns to autumn I was advancing with the Conquest, and when I said something of it he replied: "We have n't thrown the lines so much nearer your fortress, lad, but we have performed that elementary act of safety, removed an enemy from the rear."

"And whatever can I do for you?" I said, thrilled with his goodness.

He paused and leaned panting against the little fence. "Continue to keep my spirits, appetite, and good will toward men all on a rising market," he said, "and give me a hand here."

I helped him on the porch.

"Would you like to reënter through the window?" I asked, chuckling at the picture he had made.

"If you want a dead body, honestly come by, on your hands, suggest some more gymnastics, Mac."

When I left him it was with the sinews of my heart washed marvelously of their sorrow.

## CHAPTER XVII

### I ENVELOP THE FORTRESS

**T**HE next best thing to being wedded to a woman is to be wedded to an undertaking — particularly if the undertaking leads to her.

Under the general spur of my progress with the Conquest and the especial of my new freedom from maintaining Tess I paid a couple of scouting calls at Strawberry Farm but on neither was successful in seeing Hallie.

But I was favored with several talks with the consulting general, though onslaughts of snow kept him to the house. However, when his women-folk had gone to bed and when Mr. Baker sat by the fire snoozing from excess of fresh air, Mr. Stevenson and I would hold up our end of the evening, I cleaning my gun or going over fishing-tackle or whittling, while he lit cigarettes and left them to burn holes in the mantel while he talked.

His mind played with the vivacity of firelight over a range of topics that left me breathless to keep up, and as the yellow of the hearth flames would play over the ceiling from corner to corner, flickering here, flickering there, his talk would show me now this side, now that of things I had never dreamt of before. Sometimes he would interrupt himself, sometimes me, sometimes laugh at me, but always frankly and in good humor and he expected that I should understand.

I remember one night when the wind, after singing its unutterably sad little song beneath the eaves, had died away as before a storm, that just he and I were sitting before the half-burnt logs, in converse with the flames. I was whittling out

miniature logs for a tiny lean-to, Adirondack style, and he for the unusual, dreaming without comment on his dreams, the fire glancing upon his glossy blackness of hair and across the sensitive keenness of his long face. Never had I felt more clearly his kinship to shadows. He looked as though his thoughts were on nothing nearer than the next world, and though I longed to talk I was afraid of withdrawing his spirit from, say, Mars, before it was ready, when rousing a little he said:

"MacIntyre, the devil is a success. Did you know it?"

I told him that I had had a few proofs.

"Yes, the devil is a thorough success. But not as you think, Mac — not because he invented the prescription of these new cocktails, not because he invented Paris. Oh, no! nothing like those, which after all are mere apprentice works. But because he has made the whole world discontented. Fanny's discontented with the cold, you're discontented with your bachelor state, and I — I wanted to be a poet."

I repeated his now familiar sermon to me on the results of trying.

"Not for a poet, lad; at least not for me, which is not the same thing, of course. My powers tend to the poetic except when I try verse. For instance, to-night I scribbled this thing down because I was full of winter and sadness and happiness and cigarette smoke. Who could watch that fire waging its fantastic war against going out and not feel poetry! And yet instead of a poem I have a dust-pan full of words. Listen." I laid by my knife while he read me in low tones, radiant with emotion, out of the dust-pan. "I'll call it 'Winter,'" he said:

"In the rigorous hours, when down the iron lane  
The redbreast looks in vain  
For hips and haws,  
Lo, shining flowers upon my window pane  
The silver pencil of the winter draws.

"When all the snowy hill  
And the bare woods are still;  
When snipes are silent in the frozen bogs  
And all the garden garth is whelmed in mire,  
Lo, by the hearth the laughter of the logs  
More fair than roses, lo, the flowers of fire!"

There was only "the laughter of the logs" between us when he stopped and waited, evidently for me to speak, and I could say nothing, thinking his talk of hips and haws and garths and roses very pretty but no more. I tried to think of something equally pretty and meaningless to say about it, but the more I thought the more tangled my ideas became until in a burst of laughter at my apparent discomfort he cried out: "Oh! Mac, Mac, you old stone-pile, I love you outright, you're so damnably honest!"

"Sloven-witted, I should say."

"Slow-witted but true-heeled. And you're quite right not to lie just to please an old rhymester, even though to lie for such a purpose be a graceful thing. But we want more of friends than mere grace, and after all, and at the best, a lie is a hole in truth."

"That is the trouble with your poem," I exclaimed, relieved; "it is full of holes."

"How is that?" he asked quickly.

"Well, there're no robins here now, and if the bogs were frozen there wouldn't be mire in the garden, and no one ever heard of a 'garth' in the Adirondacks." I poured it out blushing, fearing that my matter-of-factness was to no point at all except to irritate him. At first I thought he did seem irritated, but I was misjudging him, for he said: "A lot of men are artists at the expense of their manhood, Mac, but you've reversed the procedure, you've been a man at the expense of an artist." And he slapped me on the shoulder, adding: "And I admire a man more than any other of our phenomena here below."

"Enough to forgive one, then," I said, resuming my whitening on the lean-to.

"Forget that meaningless word, lad," he said warmly. "If affection is n't large enough to swallow up and digest an offense, it is n't large enough to forgive it. Besides, the truth is unforgivable, and you told me the truth. I didn't write a poem and you did n't lie about it, so there is nothing to forgive, and because I am a person of poetic character with no poetic talent is no reason why I should n't be exposed to the truth. But I promise you one thing, Mac: I spoil these evenings with no more rhymes."

And he kept his word, those being the only verses he wrote while in Saranac, and I should n't have even thought of mentioning them if a series of strange events had not grown indirectly out of that evening — the first of which was nothing less than a dinner-party at which I was sole guest, Mr. Stevenson the only host.

And if mention of this seem even less important than of the poem, please remember that I was a farm-hand, while he was the most-hunted person in our county. Indeed, the city people who were wintering in our village for their health were perpetually inviting him to meals and he was perpetually on the lookout for excuses to stay home. This evening he rebelled.

"Fanny, I'm not going, and that's flat."

"Then what shall I say, Louis?" His wife was trained to these impulses and made no fretting over them, proving her good-wifeship.

"Say that I have finished a novel and am tired."

"But you never finish anything."

"Then say that they have a butler and I'm afraid of butlers."

"It is time to be going, unless you can think of something better."

His eye fell on me. "I have it!" he cried: "say that I

have a friend in, an unexpected guest. You did n't expect it, did you, Mac? We'll have a banquet, you and I, while the rest of them dine out and amuse the butler. You'll come, won't you?"

I certainly came. After the milking I dressed carefully in my one good suit and Valentine showed me in as if I had been a foreign count. Candles lit the table, there were wine-glasses shining, and flowers, though heaven alone may know where they were found in our village, and he was in a curious coat mostly open at the front and in a very sprite's humor for fun. He had just finished off copies of a menu in French. Here is mine as it lies before me now in his own hand.

*CHATEAU BAKER*

*Menu du Dec. 5, 1887*

*Huitres au Batter*

*Fowls à la Barn-door*

*Pie à la Pie-crust*

*Pain à la Americain*

*Sel*

*Poivre Rouge*

*Vin Rouge de Cantenao*

*Eau de Fontaine de Saranae*

*Visky Vierge*

At the first I was just a mite embarrassed, but I soon forgot that in the streams of fancy he let loose, particularly when it came to carving the leg of mutton placed before him.

"Oh, Mac!" he said, with a grimace, "this leg must have been pathetically mortifying to the tough old ewe that wore it." Then he'd saw away, muttering, "What a blight on the species! — Excruciating compound!" One fit of drollery succeeding another. He would draw off and have a look at it, soliloquize on the probable habits of the animal, and say: "I insist, Mac, that it still has an air of quiet resistance about it that looks bad." And then he'd have another go.

At length he daintily did it up in his napkin, and, snatching a pencil, wrote a note to the butcher who'd sent it. I

carried it to that gentleman the next morning along with the remains in the napkin and this is what he read:

R. L. S. to W. H. Oldfield  
in re a leg of Mutton

Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson presents his compliments to Mr. Oldfield and begs to return him the remainder of a joint of mutton, which he refuses either to eat or pay for. Fillet of beef had been ordered as far back as Monday. Mr. Stevenson readily understands there might arise some difficulty in supplying that; but at least Mr. Oldfield knew that Mr. Stevenson would want something on Thursday and Mr. S. prefers to hope it was in error that Mr. O. sent him anything so perfectly uneatable as the joint of which he now has the pleasure to return him part.

Dec. 5, 1887.

But to go back to our dinner-party: We had got to the wine, the first I'd ever tasted in my life, which I found very good (and I think that pleased him), when he said, "Mac, when are you going to let me see the lady that we are attacking?"

I explained that since he could n't go to her (on account of the cold) nor she come to him (for even we Adirondackers observe some of the proprieties), the revolving years seemed to offer no chance of a meeting.

"But there's a third way open," he objected. "Why not a sort of unintentional rendezvous?"

"What's that?" I asked, warming to the purple in my glass and sipping it with the ardent wish that Hallie could look in on us through the window. "A rendezvous? Oh, lad, how much you miss not knowing the classics! A rendezvous is nothing more nor less than the setting for an agreeable time—usually with a goddess. They used to have a preference for fountains or sun-lit terraces, but I dare say a shack in the woods would do. They also used to dispense with chaperons, but since I shall be present Hallie's mother need feel no alarm."

"Her mother is n't living."

"Who's that woman, then, you mentioned?"

"Aunt Sallie?"

"At the worst can't you persuade your Trojan beauty to a sleigh-ride or deer-hunt or something, so that I can contrive to have a little conversation with her?" He sighed, and pointed to a pile of letters that I had brought up that afternoon. "Every one of those people wants me to set apart my working-hours in order to be glared at. And here we are engaged in the difficult business of trying to get a country girl to look at either of us. The world is upside down."

But an inspiration soon righted it for me, for with a glance at the lean-to I was constructing the consulting general suggested that I build a real one, kill a deer, arrange a barbecue, and invite Hallie, or rather carry her secretly to it—a sort of return dinner-party at which he would be present as chaperon.

The idea struck my fancy and we spent an eager evening on the details, laying a beautiful chain of events, but failing to find a fuse of sufficient strength to set them off. And even in my sleep the contriving went on, carrying me into a troubled dream wherein I had arrived at Strawberry Farm in a two-horse sleigh to carry Hallie to the rendezvous, whereupon she refused to go without Touch, which seemed so out of the question that I awoke groaning in despair.

To my surprise the groans did not cease with my awaking, but came in a subdued, dreary undertone to my ears from the direction of Mr. Stevenson's bedroom. I swung myself out of bed, and crept barefoot down the stairs, my nightgown swishing about my legs (no one had heard of pajamas then) and opened his door quietly, shading my candle and thinking how paltry I had been over my distress when this great man had such a following of perpetual troubles.

He had lit a night light and was lying awake, face to the wall, his long lean figure strung out beneath the covers like a creature in its shroud. But when he saw my candle's glow



on the wall, he turned about to look at me and there was nothing funereal about his countenance. Had they been other eyes than those brown, brown ones set in that sensitive face one might have noticed with a smile that long neck, the glossy straggling hair. But they, so wide and generously set, so comprehending of your thought, so shining with mirth, so tender with their instant sympathy, left no thought of the rest of him. One forgot all in Robert Louis.

"You look troubled, lad," he said, the exultant fire in him leaping at the first contact with a new situation. "Have you been wrestling with the imps of darkness, too?"

"I came in, sir, to plug up your sighs."

"I'm glad of that, Mac. The black dog has been on my back, for certain. But what are your imps?"

I told him of my discouragement. As he lay there listening, the vital spark in him lit up the etherial thinness of him much as my candle lit the white recesses of the room and gave it life. Youth shone from him, and yet I knew I should hear the lips speak man's truth.

"You're right," he said, pondering. "It has been a deep slough. And our first move must be deft and soon."

He looked as I have seen an eagle on a great dead pine, his bold nose, his high-boned cheeks, his whole stern, expressive profile thrown into relief by the candle-light, its disdain of weakness gathering authority from his very position. Whether I loved or revered him the more, I could not say. I think he read a little of my feeling from my eyes. Anyway, his manner suddenly changed to that whimsical lightness.

"Whist! Did ye hear that?" and he cocked his ear comically. "'T was the black dog skedaddling from the room. We were too much for him." Then, "Thank you, lad."

And in that "thank you" he came as near as ever he would to breaching his reserve, though he was such a hand at prov-

ing out affection. Whether it was his island bringing up, or the main personal shyness of him, I never could tell, and I do not care. Two months before I had been but a chore-boy to him, one month and a fellow to help. Now I had helped him and was his accepted friend and down in me a great happiness was flowering. For this truth had come home: *The man who loves most has the mastery.*

A fit of coughing interrupted us. Then he continued huskily: "It is my blighted and exiguous body that causes the delay, Mac. I work all morning on 'Ballantrae,' which grows progressively worse, and when I go out I begin to chitter with the cold till I sound like the painful eaves birds of London for noise. Thank God daily for your body. I have a heart large enough for a ball-room, a belly greedy and inefficient, a brain stocked with the most damnable explosives, like a dynamiter's den. But on the lungs I will not linger. And it is really that good lung-hunter of yours"—he meant Trudeau—"who riddles our plans. I am on the way, give me that credit, but he hustles your thin-chested theodolite back to bed."

"'Retreat, attack, and evermore besiege,'" I quoted, smiling.

"Well, well, lad, we'll wing the fair bird yet, and while she is still any man's game. Go to the bureau there, open the second drawer, and you'll find a pile of bombs. We'll fire the topmost at the lady."

In my immediate curiosity and haste I upset a glass of water that was on the bureau. Down me it trickled like icicles turned liquid. It is extraordinary how much of one a glass of water can cover. And as I stood dripping and wriggling in the center of the room the consulting general, drawn up in kinks and kanks in the bed, laughed immoderately at me.

"What an unconscionable cheese at comedy you are!" he

whimpered delightedly between coughs. "Quick, slip it off, man, or you'll give me a pneumonia just to look at you. Get one of mine."

I slipped out of the cold, clinging sheath, my wet muscles shining in the candle-light and I was rather proud that he — the slim one — should see what ax-work and the browning sun could do to mere flesh. Indeed, as I bent over to pick up the sopped shirt he cried: "Hold there, just a moment, my Greek buck. It's a statue I saw once! God, but it was beautiful!"

When I rose he had his face turned to the wall, like Saul in the Bible before David, for a moment. But only for a moment, and there was a grim smile on his lean face as he said: "MacIntyre, if I only had a body! — just a body instead of a few sham guts sewed up in an old bag!"

Wrapped in borrowed warmth, I made another try for the bomb and found it was a book, a thin thing, whose title, "*Virginibus Puerisque*," I could make nothing of.

"Give me the pen there, and I'll discharge it at the lady," and he wrote on the fly-leaf:

This book is for Hallie Brewster, wishing her all the sweet troubles in the world, including her lover, Anson MacIntyre, from his friend, the author of this tract.

R. L. S.

"What is it all about?" I asked.

"It is a handbook on love," he said, "a treatise on every phase of that immortal malady, a fantastic tract in favor of its continuation. Possibly it may explode in your lady's heart, making such a breach that you can enter and occupy indefinitely. But it is very inexpressive, lad, after all, compared with a throw of one of your laziest glances at her, infinitely inexpressive compared with a sight of your brown shanks there." He gave a little laugh. "If you could only arrange to have your clothes fall off whilst you were passing

the lady I am sure her damnable indecision would be over forever."

His laugh shaded off into a little sigh. "I envy you, Mac. It is so far the finer thing to be in love or to risk a danger than to write the noblest book."

"Don't be beckoning back the black dog, sir," I said. "Surely if I ever saw anybody ready to risk dangers and to be in love with the risking, it is you."

"You are right," he exclaimed, brightening; "I am in love with life, in love with the universe, as you may say, despite that it is so solemn, so terrible. But it is so joyous, so noble too, that any brave man can make out a life in it, happy for himself and beneficent to those about him. But, 'tenshun, lad!—all this maundering about the universe is n't helping us with our attack upon the lady. How are we going to deliver that bomb upon her?"

"Bombs get sent, don't they?" I suggested.

"Sending is no good. Always *lead* an attack." He stopped as if the words had put an idea into the perspective of his thought. "I'd like to deliver it with you, Mac. Now Ulysses would have done it this way, I believe," and slowly at first but ever faster, with all the gestures in the world he began to sketch in a plan of delivering that thin little bomb. "The Trojan Horse, it will be the Trojan Horse all over again," he exclaimed, and in a great flow of spirits he showed me how we could borrow success from that tremendous tale of Troy. I sat huddled on the foot of the bed, listening to him, forgetting the cold, his eyes radiant, his body all too slight for the energy of his moods. I could have had the entertainment go on all night, but he caught sight of the clock and cried: "Gae wa wi' ye, laddie, or the Lord 'll na forgie ye for makkin's a puir mon slummerless this oor syne."

He stopped me, my hand on the door. "The next time the black dog crawls on my back I'm for calling you, lad. Ye've a handy way with the cur."

"I had a litter of them on me," I said, "and you've generated them all away."

"Never you forget, Mac; we'll take the fortress yet! Never grieve for the battle that is past, never for the battle that is past."

I climbed the stairs and raced the gauntlet of the cold, courageous. A talk with him always left me under clear skies. Why he had bothered with me, why, when his strength was so slender, he bothered to wage his wars against so many of the hostile things that cumbered life I could not tell — until years later when I first heard the name of that white splendor of man's gentleness called chivalry.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### WE BORROW FROM ULYSSES

**T**HERE came upon us now a succession of storms that made it impossible for Mr. Stevenson to play out the fantastic trickery of the Horse of Troy which his genius for the absurd had worked out. To me in my soberer moments it seemed a mighty lot of foolery to pin the winning of a bride on, but when I would run to him with some objection he would meet it with some superior nonsense that was somehow convincing.

"Do you contend that your lady is prettier than was Paris's?"

"Not a great deal."

"Or fussier?"

"No."

"Then what worked with Helen ought to work for Hallie, oughtn't it!" Which of course had nothing to do with it. But I contented myself with the fact that if nothing more came of it than a complete failure, complete and idiotic, the mere planning of it with him had brought us closer together, as the holding of a secret always does. He, of course, had said nothing to his family, who were going visiting after Christmas anyway, and when I was with them between him and me would pass a wink of the eye, a momentary mirth, a word such as "Remember Menelaus," or "Did Paris so?" or "What would Ulysses think?"—quite unintelligible to them but filling us with that ridiculous lightness which is the aroma of joy. And I felt knit more closely to him by these mutual

fooleries, though for days he would be working on his essays and I polishing the harness, feeding cows, and cutting wood, with but small time for holding war councils.

With the coming of Christmas I was surprised to see the fervor of preparation that all members of the family plunged into. Back home Christmas has been the most doleful day of all the year. My father never believed in exerting himself to much celebration and with the ringing of the church bell on Christmas Eve he and I seemed more set apart than ever from the rest of our kind. I came to hate it so that I would take my snow-shoes for a long plunge into the white woods.

But now it was different. Mr. Stevenson, in his own velveteen jacket, would walk up the room, twisting his own mustache, saying:

"Fanny, what shall I give Colvin?" or "Fanny, what did I give Henley last year?" and when she would suggest something he would reply:

"But that is blankly insignificant. It impudently puts me in the wrong."

And when once she said that they would probably not keep the thing he contemplated sending he replied off the trigger, "It is more elegant to retain a gift than to return it," adding, when we laughed: "Mac, Mac, don't you ever fall into the fashion of considering Christmas a chance to exhibit your better bargaining powers. That is what it is becoming in the cities — a commercial picnic, an ignoble sort of marketing — when really it is the world's collective opportunity to send somebody else upon his way rejoicing. If they could only know our joy of the whiteness, the beauty of those trees yonder being dressed for the festival!"

Indeed, outdoors had caught the festival feeling. We put suet on the little spruces for the chickadees, and filled the house with holly, and the family stood at the windows watching the Great Decorator work for three days with frost and flake and wind and then, sweeping away the sky of breaking

gray, let His low sun flood a brimming lustrous world with unimaginable glory.

I caught something, too, of the spirit of giving, even to the extent of making out lists of people and wondering what they would like, wondering especially what Hallie would like, what Robert Louis (which was the name I thought of him by in secret and longed to call him, "Mister" seeming so to hold a friend off at arm's length). He must have guessed the aimlessness of my wondering, for he said one afternoon, as he was taking a breathing time on the porch while I shoveled a deep drift away, "Mac, what in the devil are you going to give me for Christmas?"

"It is the very question that keeps sucking at my wits all day, sir."

"The secret of giving," he said, laughing, "is to give according to the other's vanity, not according to your own. That's a Christian precept for you."

"But you have enough velvet jackets," I remarked.

"My particular vanity, as you may have discovered, is to be allowed to preach. I would rise from the grave to preach, and if you will give me the chance it will make the most succulent gift you can bestow."

My posture on the snow-shovel must have convinced him that I had no clue whatever to his meaning, for he continued: "In short, Mac, I want you to give me an hour a day of your time. I want that to be your gift to me, MacIntyre."

"But you know that every minute I have is yours," I said heartily.

"Lad, lad! don't talk my romantic kind of nonsense when it is below zero," he said kindly, and indeed the breath was freezing over his fur collar. "You must know that your minutes are not mine but by the supreme gift. There is but so much of the ever-flowing stream allotted to each of us and what is yours is being used by you for your eternal advantage or disprofit, so that I am asking your most personal present



when I ask for the use of sixty minutes of your eternity each day."

He stopped his pacing, looking at me with that searching frankness which probed one as thoroughly as conscience. "Allow me the text, now," he said. "You're a horse for strength, Anson MacIntyre, and you've an immortal soul in you, I'm prepared to swear. But it is as yet too strongly qualified with clay. Now, clay is wholesome in its place and more than justified if water-lilies elect to flower from it. But I want to see you clear yourself, want you to leave the stable behind you, want you to march to the place where you can best employ the talents that the Mighty Maker has built into you. And you can do none of this, lad, without education. Therefore, give me my hour, won't you?"

My silence was hunting for proper thanks. He went right on: "With an hour I can get you full of stuff that you'd waste months in school *not* getting, such as wisdom, learning, mental kicks that will boost you up the steep ladder of wages on to the easier inclined plane of salaries. Will you give me my hour?"

"I don't think it would seem like a gift from me to you," was the first word that came out of the confusion of my pleasure.

He came over to the edge of the porch. "How little you know of friendship!" he said. "The sincerest gift one friend can make another is the opportunity to be of honest use."

And so it came about that he ordered up from New York books over which fell the flame of many a late lamp of mine, and he took after-supper hours to start me up that steep ladder he had described. But my mind was on the Conquest, not of learning but of Hallie, and I peppered my syntax with huge sighs.

"Cheer up, Mac," he said one evening, in that voice I wish I could still hear the richness of. "It took our predecessors

ten years to cover their assignment. And they did n't have three feet of snow to contend with, either."

I picked up his cigarette from off the book it was burning into and said that I was resolved on victory within a week, whatever the depth of snow or the timidity of our Greek predecessors. He took me up on the word *resolve* with, "By the way, lad, do you remember that this is New Year's Eve? Every man who's not a clergyman and, through that oversight, has imperfection clinging to him, makes good use of this night, compounding prescriptions for his immortal soul. Come, think over your follies, Mac. So'll I and we'll each make a resolution."

"Follies?" I repeated. "What sort?"

"Physical, mental, moral, or financial; there's range enough."

"Can't I have more than one?"

"Positively not. One resolution is all that's judicious for beginners, unless you lean toward the tentatively clerical; and that, Mac, is not the slant of your present habits."

With one of his April changes his mood darkened. "I think I am getting literary gray hairs," he said sadly, "over this Ballantrae buncombe — pleasant American word, that. It will be admirable for me to gird up my literary loins and take a brace, again as you Americans say. We writer-folk get lazy, Mac. We keep to the inside of the track instead of daring the rougher edge. It is time for a resolution. Think on yours, man."

He was silent, the endearing quality of his voice leaving a most persuasive echo in me. Usually there was a sprite in his eyes or in his tone, waiting to leap out into the conversation and pinch it to a gymnastic hazard. But now he was as serious as a tragedian and in an answering silence I plunged the poker among the logs, with swarms of sparks flying out in protest.

"My laziness is like that," he said. "It eats up my dreams as the darkness swallows up those sparks. My back is to the wall, Mac, and I am waging a two-handed fight against extinction, one of the body, the other of the soul. The essential part of my work, of any man's work, is not an act, it is a state, and if I am not perpetually vigilant I slop over into a state which is easier, softer, more insidious. It is no slight task to keep upon the slippery highroad. There you have my resolve."

His leg was thrown over the chair-arm, his face grave with resolution, the fire crackling and shining upon it, the cigarette burning into the table now, and because I did not understand his resolve he went on: "It is this, Mac. I resolve to do no more carrion. I have done too much in this carrion epoch. I will now be clean, and by clean I don't mean any folly about purity, but such things as a healthy man shall find fit to see and speak about without a pang of nausea."

As often, his words pushed him into action and he began to stride the room, the banter and whimsy of his usual talk ballasted down with a somber earnestness I had not felt in him before. Yet his mood was not lowering and on one of his turns he put his hand on my shoulder, exclaiming: "See, MacIntyre, how our fights compare. You are in the midst of a campaign for love against loss; I struggle for art against emptiness. We both advance. You advance against the forces who do not comprehend you or are hostile; I advance in the dark that every artist must grope his way through in the forest of art, banging my shins upon most of the trees. It is a pretty dense thicket, art, a fairly pathless forest. It is a blessed thing, however, that in this forest of art we can pursue our wood-lice and sparrows, *and not catch them*, with almost the same fervor and exhilaration as that with which Sophocles hunted and brought down the Mastadon. And you, lad, in your wilderness of life are concerned with an even greater hunt than I. You have a chance to be greater than I."

I stared at him incredulous and then laughed at the fancy. "How is that?" I asked. "It is hard to fancy sleighfuls of admirers coming here to make mouths at me the way they do at you."

He gave a wave of the hands, half pleased, half disdainful. "Mere warts on the face of curiosity," he exclaimed. "I warrant they'd come just as quickly to see me hanged by the thumbs."

"You think I'm going to be hanged?" I asked.

He laughed, though his sadness was not gone from him entirely. "What I mean is this: I am shedding ink and what brains I have in a desperate effort to effect a cure, or at least an antidote, for life. It is called art. But you, lad, go further. You are willing to shed blood to win Hallie to create more life. I would die content having written 'Finis' to a masterpiece of a novel. You will live content only when you have achieved a masterpiece of a son. You may little think it so now, but compared with my tricky abbreviations of life, compared with my figures of sawdust, your affection and passions are an infinity more important. The highest a man can be on this globe is to be the father of a son who is better than he. People call me great, say that I am destined for immortality (meaning I shall be taken out of the libraries and gaped over a hundred years from now). But do you suppose my sharp little knack of observation and my brisk little style have equal vitality, equal possibilities with the accomplishments of the children that are to be yours and Hallie's?"

The most I got out of all this was the friendly hand on my shoulder, the assurance he felt that I would win my lady. I felt so elate that the room became suddenly cramping. I must stretch, I must breathe, and I opened the door upon the porch.

The world was swimming in moonshine, or rather not swimming but lying at the sea-bottom of an immensity of light. It was not like other light but rather the embodiment of loveli-

ness, even as my hopes were the glow from something lovelier than I had attained. I held his coat for him and we stood silent before the down-sweeping fields of snow.

Instead of its lifting him as I had hoped, his mood, nightward enough already, took on the loneliness of moonlight, while I, buoyant with the cold and my winged hopes, had his despondency as my only heaviness.

"You have been an able son to your mother," I ventured. "Surely by your own words that is something."

"Something," he assented, "as unfinished as half a bridge."

"It's a pity I am made of such hard stuff you can't fashion a son out of me. You have brought the sap up into my head by your talk and by your writing. I wish I could be a credit to you." The knowledge of his feeling came suddenly to me.

"Do you?" he replied, the most sorrowful I had ever seen him. "I am not so much the creator as I think. They only mention the writing," he added bitterly. "I suppose I shall continue to pour forth pure and wholesome literature for the masses as per past performance. But in the dark hours of the night the air I breathe is dungeon air. By the God of that, MacIntyre!" and he swept his hands out to take in the distant hills, "I want to stride out into life; not merely whine about it from the ramparts. The years slip away and we walk our little cycles and turn about in little abortive spirals and come out again, hot and weary, to find the same view before us, the same hill barring the road. Don't you hear the wind in the pine yonder blowing at us a sustained 'Pish'?"

We listened and to me the slight pine-wind was not satiric but inexpressively wistful, so very light that it did not conceal the dreaming of the village below us nor the farther silence on the hills.

"There," I cried, quite unconvinced. "Hear what it really says. There is your answer."

"Read it off to me."

"It says, 'I am unsatisfied.'"

"So am I," he said grimly. "We agree there, proving I'm — mere wind."

"But don't you see?" I said, sticking to my point. "It is larger than you. Until you have made something finer than that," and I pointed out into the breathless wonder of moon-whiteness, "you are bound to keep on trying." His words sounded so big on my lips that I stopped.

I felt him looking at me. "Mac," he said, "if a man might use so lame a phrase, I'd say I love you, though the soul of the word has been stewed out of it. But flog me if you have n't lifted this vast feather-bed of an obsession that has been smothering me. I breathe. 'Until you have made something finer than that,' " he repeated, musingly, his voice vibrant with feeling.

"I but echoed you," I said, a sharp joy running through me. "Do you remember that night I spilled the water on my night-shirt and you had me stand like a statue? And you explained optimism to me? And said you had the final proof of it?"

"I remember the night well, lad, and the flawless body beauty of you there by candle-light. But what did I say?"

"You showed me the whole reason why true men never give up. You said, 'We have never made a statue worthy of our dreams.'"

"We have never made a statue worthy of our dreams," he repeated after me slowly. "Did I ever say anything so complete as that!"

And then, like the great Robert Louis that he was, he shrugged his shoulders and let the darkness fall from him, saying: "Lad, lad, you have stirred up the lees of my immortal soul! The next time that I try to lead you over the dump, kindly kick me off the porch for a one-eared white-eyed tom-cat of a miauler. I'll promise you never again to fall into such a vomitable fit of gloom. With a heaven like that

about us in our idiocy, as friend Wordsworth would say, who has the right to mutter about his little separate heartaches? Look at that dark hill lying in the shadow of its crest, look at the luster of that!" and he pointed down to the riverway winding white and still. "Oh, the whiteness of it! How I love it! How it sends the blood around my body! Who was complaining, Mac? I say, who was complaining?"

He had got back to his true self and said: "To complain is certainly to show gray hairs in the character. But come, lad, I've done all the talking. You haven't told me yet what your New Year's Resolution is to be and midnight is on us."

I looked out from the shelter of our porch, over the world lying before me, and for the first time in my life words came for the old longing I had ever had when face to face with beauty. "It is to be worthy that," I said, "to be worthy that — and you — and her."

For a moment, silence, then, "God bless you — son," he said.

## CHAPTER XIX

### ANTICS OF THE TROJAN HORSE

**I**T was from such a peak of high feeling that I looked upon the New Year, down which the stars had already begun to slide as we turned back into the house, and down whose slopes I was to wander so tragically myself. But at that moment of moon-whiteness and calm I felt capable of any endeavor, sure of any success.

The next day dawned so fair that Mr. Stevenson said we might as well start the New Year straight by launching our long-delayed attack. Thus far in the series of battles looking forward to the Conquest our successes had been largely negative. To be sure, we had shown up my mother's stand and had placed Tess at a safe distance, her activities having been transferred to Malone; but Touch was still within the lines and I had an uneasy ignorance of Hallie's feelings toward him as well as toward myself.

Mr. Stevenson, however, with the optimism of one of his romantic heroes, contended that the wily Ulysses could not be balked of accomplishing his intent and accordingly directed the plan so as to eliminate Touch and unveil Hallie's feelings at a blow. The plot was this: to hitch up the horse to Mr. Baker's wood-carrying sleigh, to dress himself up as a peddler (for which Mr. Baker's guiding-clothes served excellently), and with me hidden in a potato-bag to drive out to Strawberry Farm, relying on Scotch guile to consummate the necessary treacheries.

We set out early in a motionless cold and with a sun



so exhilarating that I doubt if all the spirits of the Grecian host combined could have equaled ours. Ulysses presented a disguise of well-conceived raggedness, and the lines of his peddler face, departing no whit from the features of imbecility, buoyed my anxiety to such an extent that we had reached the lane and I had slid into my potato-bag before I had a chance to worry as to the outcome of our extraordinary mission.

Soon the sleigh (I felt) drew to a stop and in the length of a whistle the door opened and there came out upon the stoop Mr. Brewster, with Hallie and the woman who lived with them, whom they called Aunt Sallie. All were agog with excitement, for never had their highland farm been treated to such a visitation.

It was the first time that Robert Louis had seen Hallie and as she stood there in the crystal morning, supple, fawn-haired, virgin-eyed, I fancied that I heard a catch in his breathing as if he at last knew why I had matched her wild-tinged beauty with the roses and marble of his fabled Helen.

"You talk to him, Hal," said the older woman; "I jes' can't; he looks so strange-like." And remembering my last glimpse of him, I could not blame her. Hallie stepped nearer the sleigh.

"Who is it?" she asked. "Who are you?"

"Juist mysel'," replied the peddler, his Scotch being an inspiration, I suppose, to keep them from thinking too curiously of what he said. "Mysel', I maun still believe, though I'm na sae sure as I aince was."

"What's he say, Hal?" asked Aunt Sallie. "I can't make out a word he's sayin'."

"He says he's a peddler who's lost his way and he wants me to put him on the road to Saranac."

"Hmpf!" she sniffed, "and what does he think you are, to be riding about the country-side with an ordinary —"

"An extra-ordinar', ma'am," interrupted the master; "at

the warst somethin' out o' the ordinar' in the way o' peddlery and fortune-tellin'. Lassie, gin ye'll set me on me road I'll make bold wi' your future. So rest in."

"Dad, he's going to tell my fortune. Can't I just set him past the forks?"

"I'll call Touch," said Mr. Brewster; "he can set him right; and for all I don't set much stock in the fortune-tellin' trumpery, let him to do it here."

"La, la!" said Mr. Stevenson, while my throat closed on my heart at the predicament caused by their calling Touch before we had sounded Hallie.

"La, la, lassie! gi' me the hand, then, and I'll read it here."

Hallie crawled up on the seat beside him, laughing, while I breathed as gently as possible and listened to his wily compliment and her delight. There came a studying silence.

"For you there's juist ain lad," he said, very low; "juist ain."

"What is he like?" she asked. Touch appeared this moment at the door, calling out noisily that it was n't lady-like to be holding hands like that in the daylight.

"I dare say ye would wish me to tell it different. 'T would be pleasant, na doot, to say he's the tall, licht lad on the stoop wi' the neat way o' talkin'. But MacFarlane canna lee. 'T is another."

"What's he whisperin' to her?" asked Touch, jauntily.

"What is he like—that other?" asked Hallie, very low, while my heart crouched up in my mouth to hear every word.

"Onybody kens that dark eyen are truest," he said even lower.

She gave a little sigh and my heart beat again.

"Can't you tell me his name?"

"Whist!" he cautioned. Touch came to the edge of the sleigh, and soon they had decided that he would set us

on the road to Saranac in return for some information proffered by the fortune-telling peddler. He went into the house for his mackinaw and Hallie started to clamber out of the sleigh, when Ulysses broke out with, "Lordsake, lassie, are ye going to fling off wi'out gien me so muckle as a farthin' for the fortune-tellin'?"

"I'll get you some money," she said, Mr. Brewster having gone indoors.

"Siller?" he said disdainfully. "What's siller compared wi' a picture o' yersel? Gi' me a bit picture o' yersel and I'll send news o' the dark eyen when they fa' upon it."

"A picture," she repeated, "of me?"

"Please do," he said with that something in his voice which could not be withstood, "'gin ye believe dark hair's the bonniest."

For reply she disappeared and was out again in a moment with a breathless little laugh to disguise the uncloaking of her sentiment.

"Write upon it," said he, "so that Dark Eyen may ken who his bonnie lassie is." He handed her a pencil.

"What should I write?" she asked, still out of breath.

"Write this," he counseled: "'To a Braw Lad and True, wi' the love o' Hallie Brewster.'"

Quick as a squirrel she drew back. "How'd you know my name?" she cried.

Again my breath stayed itself at this colossal blunder. Had Ulysses overleaped himself in his impetuous success? This was indeed cruel, to be thrown back by a senseless indiscretion from the very threshold of the fortress. But to my doubting ears came in his voice, undisturbed except by the broadest Scotch. "Dear lass," he said, "now wad I be a dacent fortune-teller and nicht ken your name?"

And then, to my astonishment, laughter broke through her mock surprise and she said: "Then, Mr. Stevenson, if you know my name you probably know his of the dark eyen."

"It is not impossible that I micht rin into the lad wi' the same," he said.

"I hope so," she said, so low, yet so feelingly, that not only the potato-bag but the world itself seemed too small for my joy and right then and there I would have come out of my shell and called it a victory if Touch had not stamped noisily from the house, climbed into Hallie's seat, turned us down the lane and set the Trojan Horse too swiftly on the homeward way to permit of anything but a bracing of myself between the sides of the sleigh for fear of jouncing about in a livelier manner than a bag of potatoes should.

All the while success kept singing in my heart, however, and I blessed the Trojan beast. He had already deposited a message of devotion in Hallie's breast and a measure of hope in mine, and now with the versatile peddler making ready to attempt a second sally I had only to lie as still as I could and listen while he set about achieving the second object of our trip—the exact gaging of Touch's intentions toward Hallie. After the first burst of speed was over Ulysses wilily began with a sigh and these words, "A verra bonnie lassie, I maun say."

"I guess you 've seen worse," agreed Touch in a proprietary manner that riled me.

"Ay, seen and kissed them, too."

"Sure, that's just female history repeating," said Touch, with a coarse laugh.

"A pretty picture ye wad be makin', I'm thinkin'," said Ulysses, "her and a dainty big lad like you and a full moon. A verra pretty picture."

Touch completed the picture in a few words brimming with frankness.

"I had me suspecions o' ye, richt alang, for a masterfu' lad wi' the lasses."

Touch became even more confidential, adding: "I'll admit I never had much of a trouble with the winning of

them over — not with them others. But this Hallie Brewster's a bit back-holdin'."

"But a' the sweeter at the bottom o't."

"You've said truth!" cried Touch, clapping his hand on the master's back. "She'll come around like the rest. They're all alike."

"A' alike," echoed the Scot; "a' alike gin it's a masterfu' lad like yersel' who's a-wheelin' o' them."

"Or any other fellow," said Touch, generously, "just so he goes about it right. They're all took in by compliments a lot."

"Ay, ay, they're a' a wee bit saft i' the head. But, then, they're na men, Master Touch. Ye can't expect it. But this lassie here, she'll listen to ye."

"Oh, she'll listen all right, all right!" said Touch, fiercely. "She'll listen or God'll be sorry for her. I've never been gainsaid by a woman yet and I've no intent to be."

My one desire was to break out, regardless of the consequence, and to knock in those teeth through which his dirty words found outlet. But Ulysses had had me promise caution and as we jingled on along the white-drifted road I got myself in hand, relying on a full accounting later.

"She looks sair pridefu'," commented the wily one, "and a peck o' trouble when you've got her. Mon, dear, but ye ought to be in the city. A fellow as dainty as you wastin' your efforts on a mere country lass! Ye ought to be in the city, where they rin handsomer than her on every street."

"I've had that idea myself," said Touch, moved by the compliment.

"Why, they'd be hangin' aboot your neck, lad, and ye canna deny it."

Touch attempted to, but it was a lame attempt.

"And the beesness opportunities! I canna see why ye want to throw awa sic a desperate big fortune."

"What're you driving at?" asked Touch, who did n't see, himself, just exactly how he was throwing any fortune away at all.

"Lad, will ye mind an auld man expressin' a preference when he says he already is sair fond o' ye?" Touch did not object.

"And I canna say why, but I ha' a bit confidence in ye, though it maun be misplaced." Touch thought it was not.

"Well, I'll tell ye," and Ulysses began to enlarge on the chances for making money in no less distant a resort than San Francisco. He had once spent a winter there himself and I listened to a tale that would have lured a tabby-cat into the race for riches. Touch drove the vehicle, but ever more slowly, for his mind was in El Dorado, and when the great moment came, when Ulysses pulled a well-worn wallet from his pocket and offered to lend him the price of a ticket west for some hypothetical service, Ed Touch flung away all but ambition. I felt the sleigh stop and I heard the whimsical voice of the wealth-conferring peddler say: "But, come to think of it, I've a nephew in Saranac. It's him that I ought to be makin' this offer to. Ha' ye heerd o' Anson MacIntyre?" Touch swore.

"Don't turn," said Ulysses. "I clean forgot him. I really ought—"

"Not a chance!" shouted Touch, roughly; "I'm going back for my duds now."

Indeed, I felt the sleigh turning abruptly.

"No, to Saranac!" cried Mr. Stevenson, in his real voice. "I'm perishing with the cold." He must have put his hands on the reins.

"No you don't," said Touch, brutally. "I'm a-goin'."

There was a commotion, and the sleigh slewed around, too quickly, and I knew one side of it to be heaving up, and before I could brace myself I felt it waver, slant, turn over. I heard a mingling of oaths and epithets, a "whoa-ing" in

Touch's angry voice. The mouth of my bag tore open and a burst of sunlight blinded me. Soon I made out a tangle of robes and men and straw and another burst bag, of real potatoes, and I saw that their quarrel had pitched us clean over into a drift. As the suddenness and fluster of it fell from me I viewed Mr. Stevenson brushing snow from his face and neck, hatless, and with his straggling black hair dripping and disheveled. Beside him Touch, amazed and staring. Like a painted owl he was staring in the dazzle of the sun at me, staring with the most incredulous stark blankness on his face, with an expression or rather the lack of it that would have made a scarecrow seem full-witted and alive beside him. To see a potato-bag get up and walk would have been sufficient surprise, but to see it disgorge *me*! The Trojan Horse of the great Ulysses had never carried a stock of greater surprises, and for a moment we three stood there, like figures in sculpture, snowy, shivering, speechless.

Mr. Stevenson was the first to recover the manipulation of his wits.

"Mr. Touch," he said, "allow me the pleasure of presenting my nephew, Mr. Anson MacIntyre of the Trojan Horse — a muckle hash of a beastie, by the way."

"Lord damn you!" shouted the duped one, pulling himself together. "May the Lord pack you to the devil! I —"

"We will not intrude," said Mr. Stevenson, coolly.

"You peddler! you actor! you writer-chap, you!" burst out Touch, more and more infuriated as his brain began to take in the situation and the demolishment of his sudden dream. "I've a mind to —" and he wallowed, waist-deep in the drift, toward the master. I made a desperate effort to reach him, for one good blow from Touch's arm would have broken Robert Louis in two parts, I do believe. But he stood facing the hot youth, cool, smiling a disdainful smile, while the snow impeded me and the moment hung poised, uncertain.

"Touch," I shouted hoarsely, "if you lay a finger on him I'll kill you, kill you here and now."

"Since you mention the word," he said sullenly, but stopping a moment, "I'll mention it, too. I've a trail to follow which leads to your grave. These villages is too small for me and you."

"So you're moving to San Francisco," I said.

"Possibly, on our wedding-trip," he replied tauntingly. "Hallie wants to travel, she says."

"And *that* is a name I was coming to," I said hotly, for he had grazed my temper now. "See that you don't let it fall from your dirty mouth again."

It was his turn to laugh insultingly. "Is it advice or rules? Anyways, it's a waste of your words."

"And *your* time, if you think you're going to hang around. Her dad—"

He was touched again. "You come round again, in or out of potato-bags, and I'll drill you clean."

"You clear out of there or you'll be cleaned out."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Mr. Stevenson, "you should exchange your civilities in writing, for it is far too cold to converse here."

We stood, waist-deep, a couple of yards apart, but opposite each other like dog-pups, bristling, showing our teeth, the growls rippling out of our mouths, but as yet unsprung at each other's throats. To spring would have been death to one of us, I believe, and God knows which; nor was Robert Louis sure, hence his solicitude was for me. Yet how I was to regret the fact that we did not have it out, there and then!

Mr. Stevenson was struggling with the harness and in a jiffy I had the horse back in the tracks and with a cut we were off, leaving the tall, speechless youth who had once been my friend standing there, with such a look of helpless



hatred in his glance as you would not think possible from gray eyes.

"His desire was murder," said Mr. Stevenson, "but he hated to risk the old peddler in addition to the potato-bag."

"And so did I. It would have finished you."

"And why not, lad? Any death is passable so it be not in bed."

The horse jogged on and we talked little. "He'll cool off a lot on the walk home," I said, for I fancied that my friend was worried.

"I'm afraid not. I've tried to help you, MacIntyre, and have only succeeded in making matters much worse."

"Don't say so," I implored; "for even if the old Trojan Horse did feel his oats, Ulysses pulled a double victory. We know Touch's intention and Hallie knows that 'dark eyen are truest.'"

"Yes," he said non-committally.

"But what I want to know is whether you really would have sent him west?"

"As surely as death pants at our heels," said Ulysses, brightening a moment. "I did know a laundryman and a newspaper editor and some miners out there, when I was drinking down their execrable red wine that long distressing winter, and the tales I told Touch were of real life but a mite accelerated, as tales should be. I think in the end I could have done him some good, and anyway it would have been worth the carfare to be rid of him. With Tess sent to Malone and Touch to Frisco I could have taken out a license as an emigrant bureau." He laughed a little wearily at his own picture, adding, "Ah, Mac! if it had gone well I should not have minded this weariness!" And indeed I was worried until I had got him into bed and some of Mrs. Baker's hot coffee inside him.

And even then I saw very little to be cheerful over. We

had made the great attack and she was brought nearer me only by the item of one photograph. I took it upstairs to my room and looked at its presentment of the sunny loveliness that had been so near me an hour ago. Across the front was written in a round, open hand, "To a Braw Lad and True, wi' the love o' Hallie Brewster."

"'To a Braw Lad and True,'" I read again, and "God help me to be," I said to the brave eyes looking at me; "for God knows there 'll be need."

## CHAPTER XX

### I AM SPED ON MY WAY

**M**R. STEVENSON had soon to pay the piper for the excursion to Strawberry Farm on my behalf, coming down with a long half-illness that neither permitted him to go outdoors nor yet kept him confined to bed; and I was mightily exercised about him.

But he was the cheerfulest invalid that ever gazed at a row of bottles and I resolved not to let my own jaw hang too low, though I had an abundance of trouble. For in addition to the ache and passion that filled me whenever my eyes fell on the picture "To a Braw Lad," whenever my thoughts soared from the chore in hand to her who was so very far from hand, I was constantly worried by the thinking of what Touch would be planning with that hatred we had stirred up in him.

Nor could I now journey out there to see, not because I feared the lead-drilling he had threatened, but because there had crept into our village the forerunner of that plague which Mr. Stevenson had read to me about from the newspaper, the grippe. In the autumn it had landed from abroad and was reaching steadily westward, snatching the most unusual and healthy-lived victims. Andrew Baker for one, than whom there was none more temperate, was pulled to bed almost immediately and kept there for weeks with fever and pains. This not only left me the ice-cutting and wood-hauling to do alone and on top of my other chores but also scared Mr. Stevenson into a seclusion. For he feared even a mere cold worse than a brace of she-bears.

Soon we began to hear tales from other places of lamentable distress on account of this new disease. Within a month there was scarcely a house that had not some member down with it and many a shallow grave was pickaxed into the hard soil that bitter February. And bitter it was. Not that we had so much snow — that was being saved up for the great blizzard — but the cold struck in almost from the first of the year, increasing until it seemed as if the last comfort of heat had been blown from the universe. We were left huddling about our stoves in our wooden buildings that cracked and shivered with the frost, making excursions out for feeding the watchful cattle, and fetching more firewood, with the pale sun shining ineffectually down like a painted picture on the ceiling of our great ice prison. Wolves were heard again, as they had not been since my birth-year, '69. I should have known that great events were in the air.

With long nursing Mr. Baker was about ready to work again when Mrs. Baker came down with the plague, although Mrs. Stevenson had insisted on all sorts of wearisome precautions. She had gone to New York to bring back Robert Louis's mother from a visit and look after the next move of the family.

I, being so healthy, was appointed Robert Louis's special servant, taking in his trays, following Valentine's instructions called through the door about his housekeeping, and taking Dr. Trudeau's orders down by pencil to see that they were properly carried out. The doctor had no time for the evening talks that he used to delight in with my master, being whipped about, despite the cold, from hamlet to hamlet, though himself a sick man. He was a marvel, an example of Robert Louis's own doctrine of cheerful bravery, which was the fundamental bond that their disputes never snapped.

As you may guess, I was busy, myself, pitching down hay for Silky and Sulky, listening to what troubles Robert Louis was having with some lady character or other, shoveling

snow from the roof before it might crack the posts, carrying swill to the pig, carrying letters to the post, and coming back to warm my spirits before the glow of the master's comment on the American distemper — his name for our money-worship.

And then, on the eleventh of March, as I have no trouble in remembering, word came to the Bakers, from Bloomingdale, that their niece was dying and would they come over? Mrs. Baker, only just convalescent but very brave, insisted upon going, and so Andrew wrapped her up in the sleigh, and off they went, leaving me in charge. To be sure, they said that they would be back early the next day, but it was a large responsibility, just the same, for on my shoulders lay not only the care of Mr. Baker's live stock through a cold night, but also the care of a delicate man of letters, who was as headstrong as delicate. Yet I welcomed all, for the care took my mind from her, the unvisitable.

No sooner were the Bakers safely jingling down the river road and I had got the mail and fed the chickens and started the noon-meal fire than Valentine, the Stevenson servant, began to complain of a violent headache, which I had learned for the sign of grippe. This was a pretty plight if she should have it! Then, swift as a trout-strike, I thought: what if she should give it to Mr. Stevenson and in the absence of everybody I should have to nurse him? Suppose he should die. Thoughts come like that when worries lie thick. So I harried her off to bed, to be safe.

Whereupon Mr. Stevenson takes it into his head that he would like to go out for a skate. I expend a little oratory on him upon the wisdom of it, as he has not been out of the house for three weeks. But he declares that fresh air is the one thing he needs. So, though I am the only able-bodied seaman in an ocean of things to do, I see that he is enough dressed, for an immense dull cold lies heavy on the afternoon, and we go over to Moody Pond a little back of the house.

It was no wonder that he liked the steel blades. For of the three things that Robert Louis Stevenson could do best in this world — talking and letter-writing and skating — I am not sure but that the last did n't come first. He could write his name on hard ice with the sharp runners, as legibly as with a steel pen; and with infinitely more pride than he would compose some sparkling remark. But on that afternoon he was out of sorts with his craftsmanship.

"I skate like a piece of damp gingerbread," he exclaimed once, and again: "There! the moment I think I have that turn something goes wrong. It's like a novel."

After a restless half-hour we started back toward the house. The wind had got into the northeast and what little there was of it was as raw as red liver, which was unusual enough with us; and the sun was sneaking down into an ominous muddle of vapors. A storm was brewing and the light of the waning day, with its sinister glint, untouched by any trace of warmth, made me wonder what might happen with Valentine ill and the Bakers so far away. I said nothing of my fears, however, and indeed nothing at all.

"Why are you so loquacious?" said he, noticing it. "You have n't said a word this half-hour."

"Neither have you, which is the more unusual."

"What we both need is a little cheering up. Bring up a bottle, Mac. Your tyrannical weather and the devilish depression of all this sickness have plucked all the ginger from my marrow. God does all things well, we are accustomed to suppose, but certainly by immensely strange, solemn, and murderous contrivances.

It was cozy in the big kitchen and I told him so with such effect that he brought his penny pipe out there and played on it. But he fetched only an endless tune that dragged off into the most melancholy thinness while I was doing some necessary chores. Then I brought some wine and found him staring out at the window over the frozen river and looking pretty

seedy. I wondered whether the plague had not at last laid its hand upon him, so pale, so unsteady did he appear; and he must have divined my thought, for he asked, "Mac, do I look unco guid to you?"

I told him as keen as a logger on the scent of drink, and gave him some, and the color came back a trifle.

"Well, I'll take your word for it. But I feel only passable in my moldy way. Where's Valentine?"

I had to tell him, adding: "We'll have a cozy night of it here. I'll cook you a nursery supper like those in the kids' verses you read me and we'll eat it here, which is the finest place, I think, with the kettle singing and a grand storm making without."

"I thought there was a storm coming. Well, another month and I'll be out of your vile hole forever." I was silent, for the remark hurt, and seeing it, he added: "Though it suits me and the others of the same persuasion whom by rights it ought to kill."

"It is the merriest spot in all the world, take it for all," I said, hoping that he would wrangle with me over my beloved Northland. "Saranac and Placid contain all that a man needs: fine air, fine mountains, fine lakes, fine occupations, fine men —"

"And the finest girl," he said slyly. "And your brooks are not so different from my burns, lad, your upland reaches from my highland heather. But it is not my land, after a'. And perhaps I do not deserve it, for am I myself? I have a song in my head I shall put down some day, perhaps in one of those hidden soft valleys of the green-and-purple islands. It is to them that I like to dream I am going when your austere weather makes me dread lest there be cold in heaven:

"Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,  
Say, could that lad be I?  
Merry of soul he sailed on a day  
Over the sea to Skye."

"Skye?" I questioned, wondering what he meant.

"Skye, Mac, means the west, sunset, and irrevocable adventure.

"Mull was astern, Rum on the Port,  
Egg on the starboard bow;  
Glory of youth glowed in his soul:  
Where is that glory now?

"How do you find it?" he asked.

"You will never be that way," I said, "but there are some that are. Say the first one over."

"Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,  
Say, could that lad be I?  
Merry of soul he sailed on a day  
Over the sea to Skye.

"Give me again all that was there,  
Give me the sun that shone!  
Give me the eyes, give me the soul,  
Give me the lad that's gone!"

"Will I ever come to that?" I asked him. "Will it ever be that I will like the trees less, or her?"

He did not answer me but was looking through the window at the great trails of vapor up-curling from the west — mare's tails, we call them — and was saying over to himself that first sad little verse:

"Sing me a song of a lad that is gone —  
Say, could that lad be I?"

Then he turned, saying: "There was to be a last stanza for me, Mac, but never let it be for you:

"Billow and breeze, islands and seas,  
Mountains of rain and sun,  
All that was good, all that was fair,  
All that was me is gone.



"Promise me, lad, that you will never let it stand that way with you."

"That is not a hard promise while I have your example," I said.

He laughed at that, laughed outright, and the dark spell passed.

"You have a vivid imagination," he said when his laugh was finished and he had drawn up a chair before the stove, which was beginning to purr with warmth and birchen cheer. "If most people had your imagination this land would be too rich for them; they could live contentedly in a drain-pipe, admiring the curve of the crockery heavens, the rich color of the lining, the exquisite equality of the orifices. But I need not make fun of you. As my old nurse Cummie would tell you, Mac, there was never a bairn had to live in his head more than I. And I'd rather go through it again, be strapped to a bed and enjoy the land of make-believe, than be without that for want of which life itself would stale in the ages of an hour."

"I think being like that comes with living with open fires," I said.

"And open skies. But there is something more that must be in you. You somehow know the good things, lad. I wonder how it is."

I told him about the hard winter I was born, and the wolf voices.

"Ay, but that does not account," he mused. "You love, as I love, beauty touched with sex and laughter — laughter with God's earth for background."

"And you will admit that all these dwell here in my Northland," I said, refilling his glass and pushing back the white curtain so that he could see the land sloping into the immense wildness of the western sky. "There is all that."

"And perpetual youth thrown in. It is a young land and you are young with it."

But I had responsibilities as well as youth and could get only scraps of talk between milking the cows and turning the toast and seeing to Valentine; and when I sat down again with him the tossed flame of sunset was burned out, leaving an ashen line along the horizon. Yet we made an intimate picture within. The fire glared red in the dusk through the cracks of the stove, darkness peered at us from the room-corners, tranquillity spoke in every little sound; and a boyish man, pacing the rag carpet, sprawling over the arm-chair, lighting a cigarette, showed thin and apparitional in the glow, talking on, while I listened, until the potatoes should be baked.

Once, when he had again fallen into a despairing vein, I reminded him that he had become popular. He did not relish the remark. "Popularity? And what is it? Only the brutal public snouting in the trough can return the answer; brutal public and dubious answer. A man may have done well for years and then he may fail. He will hear of his failure. Or he may have done well for years and still do well and the critic may have tired of praising him. Or there may have sprung up some new idol of the instant to whom they prefer to offer sacrifice. Here is the obverse and reverse of that empty and ugly thing called popularity. Will any *man* suppose it worth gaining?"

"And what of fame, sir?" said I, immediately disdaining popularity.

"That is different. I've been eager, Mac, all my life, for legitimate distinction. But I can lay my hand upon my heart at the end of my career and declare there is not one thing — no, not not life itself — which is worth acquiring or preserving at the slightest cost of dignity."

"What do you mean by dignity?" I asked, thinking of pictures of dignified persons I had seen.

"No wonder you do not know," he said, "if you read the papers. In the papers, in this America of yours, it is popu-

larity, it is wealth, success, outward respectability, that everybody wants. How often is honor mentioned? But the dignity I mean is the carriage and heart of honor. I mean there is nothing worth sacrificing the soul's great desires for. The soul asks to be good rather than prosperous, to be essentially, not outwardly respectable, to be upright and not successful first; the soul asks honor, Mac, not fame."

It was with words kindled from the beacon which his experience kept burning that I was being taught, and by them that he made me feel there was more in me than a knack for milking cows. Yet he could leap lightly down from the pulpit and swear at the weather like a proficient logger. And that night, when I had laid the cloth and barred the shutters in, we had a cozy meal. Later I left him reading in bed, to tend Valentine, and after seeing all shut went to my own. The last sight I had of that day was a couple of faint mist-wrapped stars; the last sound was the low start and failing of the wind in the eaves; the last thought: Hallie, so far away in the cold and lonely night.

I woke early with the dismalest feeling on my chest, a feeling of being held in my sleep by a clinging heaviness. And even after I had opened my eyes the strange disquiet did not leave me. I looked out, which is the instinctive first act of a woods-dweller, and saw that the day was a thickness of hurrying snow, that morning was more an act of the calendar than a success of any sun. Though I did not then know this for the most famous of all storms, nor guess how great an intimacy I was to have with it (and it with my fortunes), I could tell from the darkness — not only overhead but in the air about — that there was a great load of snow to fall.

I found Mr. Stevenson sitting up in his wrapper in bed, looking dolefully out upon the clutter of the storm. He, himself, was very gray and fatigued-looking and his first word was

an inquiry for Valentine, whose throat was too sore for swallowing — a morsel of news that you may be sure I did not feed him.

My morning was busy enough and I ran around my circle of chores like a rat in a wire cage, milking, feeding, watering, cooking, nursing, storing in wood against a continuation of the snow, supplying Mr. Stevenson with books, looking a thousand times for the Baker sleigh, forcing the fires, for the east wind was stealthily creeping in through crevice and beneath doors. My charge wrote all the forenoon in bed, tossing the papers about like a husking-party and frowning as he worked on the ending of "Ballantrae," which was beginning to torment him. He left off after the lunch that he scarcely tasted, complaining of headache; and his eyes, I thought, were glassed with fever. It kept on snowing from the gray bag of sky, which seemed to get heavier instead of lighter with the emptying. The wind flowed with a persistence beneath the sashes and sobbed under the eaves until the cat crawled beneath the stove and stayed there. And indeed there was a quality in the air that seemed to chill the flames in the grate.

Afternoon, and no Bakers. I was in the midst of caring for Valentine and the stove, plying regularly between the two with little pleasure excursions to Mr. Stevenson's room in between, trying to think of something to cook for supper that would be an inducement to living instead of supplemental to it, when there came a *rat-tat* at the door and my spirits felt the heart's throb of thankfulness to have the Bakers at last. But it was only a pale urchin whom I recognized for a neighbor of my mother's who occasionally did chores for her. He floundered in, snow-shoes on and all, whimpering with the cold.

"Yer ma's daown with the plague and a-crying out fer yer ter come." He crowded against the stove. "She ain't got anybody to nurse her, she says, naow that you've sent Tess away, and she's real bad with it."

The news snaked down my spine and ran out my veins against all the natural currents of my body. What was my duty? I could not bear to stay away from my own blood in need; yet certainly I had the responsibility of the great writer on me till the Bakers should return. I decided to run and see her, take her some of the medicine that Mr. Stevenson had up from New York against the present sickness, and return before the fires should burn too low. I could not bear to imagine my mother dying, nor even thinking me heartless, thinking me revengeful for her Christmas bitterness. So I left some gruel beside Valentine, piled the stove full of wood, saw Mr. Stevenson supplied with materials, put on my bear paws, and holding a little bottle of the drug close to keep it from freezing, beat tracks into the large softness of the snow.

After so much bustle, after so much hot thinking, it was a great relief to feel the swift, inarticulate flakes brush into my face. How they rode by, an innumerable brotherhood breathing of the spaces from which they had come! My worries joined them and flew away and while I walked with the youngster through the steadying drive of gray, I recovered a little of the joyousness that should always go with snow.

We shuffled into the village, along the manless streets, and out again along that well-known road, until I left him at his house and came to that other dilapidated, storm-assaulted shack.

She was lying with her eyes closed; and her wan face, framed with its tangle of black hair, showed worn and hard, and on the set of her features there seemed no room for sweetness. She opened her eyes and a mother light dawned in them, only to fade when I failed to kiss her. But I could not.

The room had a stuffy chill about it and I busied myself redding up the carelessness of it that would once so have hurt her who watched me. When she found that I was not intending to stay she broke forth into complaints.

"Will you forsake your Ma for strangers, 'Son?'"

"It is as I tell you," I repeated, "only till the Bakers return and my duty is done there."

A little passion seized her and her thin fingers worked nervously along the edge of the dirty counterpane. "Naow, if I was your Hallie-girl you'd be quick enough to nurse me."

"It is my duty, Ma. I'll get in some one to look to you and it ought n't to be more than three hours."

"I cannot bear it if you leave me," she moaned. "I'm dying. You're an evil son and ever have been. And now to neglect your own flesh for another!" A mirroring of the temper she had, of the injury she was about to do me, quivered across her features. "Come close, 'Son, and I'll tell you a secret."

I went close, my gorge rising at the malignant trace of age on her face that had once been so proud and spirited. "Closer," she croaked. I bent over her. "I was n't going to tell you," she whispered, "but sence my sickness don't worry you, perhaps *hers* won't. She's down with it, too."

"Who?" I asked in agitation. "Tess?"

She shook her head with an effort. "Closer," she said, and into my ear she breathed the name I had dreaded to hear.

"Hallie?" I cried.

She nodded, weak from the effort of speech, but the green gleam of jealousy glimmered between her unwashed lids.

"Tell me," I implored her, desperate, "do you really know or are you trying to torment me?" But for an answer all I had was a parting of lips that showed uncared-for teeth.

It was the most cruel smile since Judas laughed in his sleeve, and an arrow went through me. If her word was true, the devil had achieved his nicest agony and sped it to me; if false, she had in a breath paid me for all the supposed desertion and evil she had accused me of. In an instant I wished that I had not come, that she had died in her bed, and following that instant came my powerless penitence. I resolved to see her comfortable and then — oh, then I was face to face

with my temptation! Was I to visit Hallie and take her medicine as no doctor could be supposed to do? Or was I to remain loyal to my friend and let Strawberry Farm perish? Would Touch come to town for aid and save Hallie's life? That was the last exquisite stab of my invention.

I saw my mother warmer, a trifle more to rights, stopped on the way back to engage the urchin's sister to stay with her, and sped back to the Bakers'. How my hopes built on one another, that I should find them there, that I could be released for the trip that alone could ease me of my dread! But all was as I left it.

That afternoon was the longest that I have ever spent on this earth and — save one — the most wearing. Robert Louis had refused to rest and it was my difficult task to listen to him utter his random notions; to look out at the window incessantly for the Bakers yet not appear to look, to appease my longing to be off yet give no appearance of anxiety. There was but one topic that my disturbed condition could tolerate, and some quick sympathy in him read it — love of women. We were soon launched upon it and in the deepening privacy of the afternoon I unveiled my wonderings, asking him many a question long undercurrent in the stream-bed of my curiosity.

"Life presents the problem of love with a terrible directness, Mac, and at the very time when we are least able to judge calmly."

"Or ask others."

"Yes, there is no asking, for no man can settle another's life for him. It is the test of the nature and courage of each that he shall decide it for himself. Each in turn must meet and beard the Sphinx."

"And must it always be one-sided at the first?" I asked him.

"Who can lay down rules for the unruly passion? Don't be too ready to believe in love, my lad. There are many

shams. One is natural desire, which gives you no right to any particular woman. That comes with love only, and that, I make free to guess, can never come to the Touches of life. They are the sham-tasters."

"But the real, the true, does not one know?"

"Do you not know?" he asked, smiling. "The true love will not allow you to reason about it; no, will not allow you to reason about it."

"That is so," I said, feeling a great calm pervade me. "It is that way I love Hallie."

"You are among the fortunate few, then, lad. You no longer have to reason but can stride out into life and act."

A wave of elation brought me standing. "I would do anything for her and, as God plans the world, I will!"

"Bravo, lad!" he said. "Obey love, which is the nearest to God's will that we can interpret, and fling ambition, prudence, health, wisdom, even, down and plough them under to nourish that one sweet flower. It is the lesson of life." And he repeated with the reminiscence of deep feeling:

"Come ill or well, the cross, the crown,  
The rainbow or the thunder,  
I fling my soul and body down  
For God to plough them under."

He sat up in bed, clothed in his rakish garments, flushed with the recollection of such days as he once had had with love, and told me of the great occasion he had of striding out and acting. I listened, rapt with the courage of his story, while he related his love-discoveries in France, the bars that he must break, his trip in the emigrant ship, his illness in California, his victory. On his watch-chain hung a little silver compass given him by a California friend to use in the forests of Silverado, where he had taken his bride, and as he told me of those days his long fingers played reminiscently with it.

"What does that stand for, lad?" said he, pointing to the N.



And when I was silent, knowing he meant me to say more than "north," he spoke very low:

"*Noblesse*, lad — remember that — the constancy of the soul."

It was a picture that crowds to my memory whenever a great snow darkens the air to this day: how he sat, pulled up in bed, his long legs making a mountain of knee beneath the spread, two pillows propping his eager head, a cigarette making a little heaven of blue smoke beneath the low ceiling, a heaven from which fell the warm and stirring memories of his romance, while outside the endless snow drove by in slanting sheets of interweaving gray.

Dusk came early and with it the throb and passion of the storm began to increase. Hope for the Bakers faded and I crushed down my ever-pressing anxiety to be off to Hallie. Yet, I thought, how can I spend a night in such suspense? And still, thought I, how can I forsake my duty? Is not this a higher form of love?

When I went back to Mr. Stevenson he was writing again in the little room, at the desk where I had first told him my name less than a half-year back. But what a strange half-year! Then I had been friendless, now I had a friend. Could there live greater difference in six months than that?

He looked up at my entrance and read the shadows in my face, the desperation at delay, the memory of my mother's eyes, the anxiety I felt about him, so energetic on so slight a fund of strength. He said: "You are disturbed, Mac. What is it?"

"Nothing much," I said, not daring to be brave.

"He is a shallow friend whom you can't trust with a confidence," he said, his dark eyes tender as a mother's.

"Well, it's Valentine," I began.

"And me?"

"Somewhat. And the Bakers. It's getting a big storm."

"Mac, Mac, you will never make a good liar! You must

pardon me, lad, if I have been eavesdropping at the door of your heart. But it is a friend's privilege, is n't it? Tell me what underlies. There is something you have not told."

It was a terrible temptation coming on me so suddenly and invoked on the score of friendship and the word "Hallie" nearly escaped me. The word "Touch" did, and quite without intention I had told him about our first relations and the joy I had had in thinking I had found a pal. Mr. Stevenson's face hardened as I went on and he said very quietly: "There are some whose mold is not large by nature. And there is such a thing as worthiness, my lad."

"When was the making of a friend ever decided by worthiness?" I said, from the depths of what I had experienced.

"You are right," he said slowly. "Friendship does not rely on a return, though it hopes for one. The soul of friendship, as of love, is giving; and it is there that it differs from the common churchly piety whose eye is fixed upon the heaven of a reward. However, when you find that a man is essentially unworthy, like your Touch—"

"It makes small difference with feeling," I interrupted. "I do not make my feelings. They come unsought and they go, seeking. They may die down or flare up with occasion, but if they are of friendship for man or of love for woman they never quite pass away."

"I wonder if it is so," he mused. "Mac, where did you find all this?"

"On the trail," I replied, almost for the moment happy. "Feelings grow strong in the forest. Friendship is like a clearing along the trail at the end of which lies love."

"Here's to the home at the end," he said, blowing a cloud of blue toward the ceiling.

"Which you have given me the skill to build."

"Are you making fun of my Trojan Horse, the execrable beast?" he inquired.

I was glad to see him give that tang to his words, as he did

when he had some pleasure in them, glad to see his smile of understanding; and I wanted very much, as I had wanted long, to ask him one favor, yet wondered how he would consider it. Remembering that he respected those who dared I said, "Mr. Stevenson."

"Mr. MacIntyre," he mocked me, lightly.

"I have wanted one thing mighty long."

"Then if it is in my power, lad, it shall be yours. But remember I can't cook."

"But suppose you think it is very brazen of me to ask it?"

"Then you *shall* have it, lad." He looked at me curiously.

"May I stop calling you 'Mister'?" I said, feeling much embarrassed.

"What a relief!" he said, his eyes sparkling. "I thought you were going to ask me to get supper. Why, Mac, lad, I was going to insist on that long ago. For I saw that you and I were traveling the same trail. You have been a clearing on mine this winter. Do you like 'Bob,' or 'Louis'?"

"I like 'Robert Louis' the best of all."

"Then Robert Louis I am to you, Mac, from now on, and there's a five-pound fine if you ever call me 'Mister.' It's a handle, anyway, fit only for pumps and such."

"Then I'm a happier fellow this night — Robert Louis."

And I was happy that I had disguised my deadly longing to be off on the road to Hallie. I rose to feed some sound maple sticks into the little stove when I heard a stamping and clatter and Andrew Baker and his wife, sheeted with snow and ghostly in the face, were at last in their kitchen.

"We've been the hull afternoon coming the last miles," he said. "It's a powerful big storm. Lend a hand here, Mac."

I quickly brushed them off and gave them some hot things to drink and they were soon launched on the tale of their fight against the storm. But I had no ears for it. The voice inside me that all the afternoon had been crying, "You cannot go," had switched to, "Now you can," and I had the vial of

medicine which I had prepared, carefully wrapped near to my body, and had on my mackinaw and snow-shoes when Andrew Baker saw me.

"Ain't the cattle all right, Mac? You need n't go out again."

"But I have to."

"Whyfore, boy?"

"To take some medicine to — to a friend."

"Don't you stir out of this house. The wind is rising and soon it 'll be too bad to face."

As he spoke I heard the body of a gust flatten against the window and the swift brush of snow speak of mysterious things in the dark without.

"But I have to and it is n't so far." The need was calling within me and I must go despite his protests. Life, which so long had glided by as unvexed as a lake with only some whirling here and there to show its depth and power, had suddenly seized me in its full rush and shown me that it was a river, and relentless after all. Now that I can look back on what was to come I can see that without Robert Louis's strengthening I should have been pulled beneath its surface. And even at this moment he heartened me, for as I was tying on my muffler and arguing with my employer I heard the door open and he stood there, gaunt, feverish-eyed, but supremely a spirit of daring and romance.

"I overheard you, Mac. Certainly you must brave the storm for her. If I had guessed I should have sent you earlier. Brave the storm and if necessary the danger at the other end." I knew that he meant Touch and his threat. "Here is a talisman, lad. Keep it with you. I shall not sleep this night thinking of you. But it is right for you to go. Remember this: no man is any use until he has dared everything."

"For love," I added, quite lifted up, and proud that he should take my side.

"For love. That is well to add," he said. "No man is any use until he has dared everything for love." And he said it once more, the thin brown ghost of him standing in the doorway, a very emblem of audacity. I looked at the thing he called a talisman. It was the silver compass. He smiled at my delight. "It is only to remind you, Mac, that though Fortune tumbles men about, I have not found that they change their friends, by God!"

"I shall point true north," I said. "It shall direct me to act."

"Ah! act! That is your word, my lad. Acts if wrong can be forgiven. But not even God can forgive a hanger-back. Go, and luck be with you."

I closed the door upon them. I had drunk him down like a cordial and was ready for what lay before. One strap had to be fixed over and I went around the house to try it before plunging into the tumultuous night. As I passed, I looked into his study window. He had seated himself before that desk but was not writing. A gust enveloped me, and the sound must have reached him; for he looked out into the night, and I knew he was thinking of me. The gust passed and I plunged, and soon behind me faded the homestead, faded the blur of light that enclosed the slender, lonely master spirit.

## CHAPTER XXI

MARCH 12, 1888

I HAD crossed the threshold into the storm that was to hold the East in such a thrall of violence of wind and deadliness of cold that for a generation no snow might fall nor wind arise without the people and the papers saying, "It was worse, in the blizzard of eighty-eight."

But greatness can rarely be recognized in its beginnings, and except for the continuous flow of particles upon my face and the perpetual roaring of noises from the upper forest where the winds were heavier, I had no intimation of what was ahead. My shoes sank heavily where the wind had not packed the going, and in exposed places the night thrust a breathless stream of cold against me. But my stride said, "Going to Hallie. Going to Hallie," and in the lift of that I could have faced thirty miles instead of the three that kept me from my love.

The road out of Saranac mounts and as the few lights of the valley were blurred to nought I felt for the first time the strength of the wind. It was bearded so thick with snow that at the fullest gusts there was no breathing possible, and a mighty pleasure filled me as the struggle began, I was now beyond the horizon of others and had entered a kingdom of my own.

My road soon led into the weighted wood, sounding with salvos of the gale. Occasionally I would cross open spaces where the dull smother of flakes was made sharp with a steel-edged cold. In the gale it felt to me that I had become an atom, a curious being that had refused to merge with the

monstrous desolation hurrying by. But when I again reached the shelter of the forest and could breathe again, the exulting voices of the storm threw me into their spirit. As yet no intimation of fear as to the outcome was interwoven with my growing wonder at the glory of the night. A nimbleness of joy trod down the opposing drifts that curled at me out of the gray-black bellowing of the wood.

Half-way and the bitterness was becoming noticeable. I was gradually being stripped of that surplus of heat with which I had left the cottage. The temperature was below zero, and in an express-swift wind that means a drilling cold as inhospitable to life as outer space looms to the naked soul. And with the cold I felt intrude the first doubts: Would Touch persevere in his enmity? would Hallie welcome or even understand? and, finally, should I get to her? In another half-hour that question became paramount.

They say that drowning coaxes a man into unconsciousness by presenting a diverting scroll of one's past life, and I can say that annihilation by snow tries to do so by the same device. After one reaches a certain pitch of fatigue every further step is a fight against the twin devils of cold and weariness, and soon in the languor of it all the mind drifts back to the surer basis of events that really happened. It was so with me. As my shoes grew heavier, as the muscles began to argue with the brain, I tried to solace myself with fragrant memories of my boyhood trips, with soft pictures of the great passes, with half-achieved wishes from the balsam restfulness of star-lit beds. My mind held many pictures and my heart was light with the still undisparaged gift of youth.

There is no way of reproducing the passion of that night. If I describe and dwell upon the miracle of snow, you lose the feel of the wind; if I comment on the wind you have time to forget the cold; and if I tell of the cold, there fade from your attention the tearing rapacity of the gusts, the towering noise, the sense of endless might, of utter loneliness that enwrapped

me. The wild confusion seemed to have been distilled of all humanity, the planet swept bare of life. Was I now but an interloper in chaos? Had God tired of the region and turned truant to His responsibilities of control? And for answer flew the interminable swarm of unseen insects at me in smothering waves, each stinging out of me a little of my life as it passed. There had been no storm the like of this.

I went on between dark lines of interminable firs. The snow seemed like an unseen thicket of which I could never clear myself, never push out on the other side. The woods in their lofty tops talked to me, but I could not understand. I tried to speak, to see if I could make my speech plain to Hal-lie when I reached her, but my words were blown from me and I never heard them. Time had lengthened out immensely, thought had lost its sharpness, and I had become almost a nonentity, a creature who must push on, a lump of weariness, climbing, sinking, pushing out my limbs. Out of the currents of sensation I pulled stray ideas like fish; to get to the lane, to reach the door, to knock, to be dragged in, to give the medicine, to sleep. Suddenly a fear stabbed me awake: had I passed the lane?

Strawberry Farm is set in its clearing like the pupil in an owl's eye. There I should be exposed to the upland open sweep of the blizzard. There I should know whether my strength, my store of heat, challenging the universe, could successfully defy it. I felt in my pocket for Robert Louis's talisman and the touch brought back his word, "No man is any use until he has dared everything." And with that my courage found its second wind. I was still wondering where I was, when a vaster wave of air assailed the forest, a thicker blast of snow turned me about for breath, and I knew that out there was the clearing. It seemed the very frontier of remorseless fury, that opening where there was no earth, no air, only one vast rush of blind wings through the greatness of the dark.



I took a breath beneath a burdened spruce. I could not go back, nor yet stay still for long. It seemed now little matter how close I should come to eternity in the traverse. Yet it was well to rest.

The great storm seemed now to have reached the height of mortal tempest. The swift passage of the atmosphere, the weight of cold, the dragging fingers of the snow already fallen, the flying snow that sucked so at the breath — these I had combated. But out beyond there seemed to threaten worse. Existence had reached its night; Life was not expected to live there, and the whole impartial chaos was being urged by the colossal wind to join its flight to extinction. Was it of this that the woods had talked in their lofty tops? Was it this that I had not understood? Now my fatigue was ready to murmur, "I understand," and I would gladly have sunk into the easy forgetfulness of surrender had it not been for her, somewhere in that blank ahead. Had I been sure that she was dead there would have been no hesitation on my part. But the possibility that she might be alive, might need help, upheld me; and so much did I desire to prove my love that had that flood been fire instead of snow I should have still essayed the crossing.

And now I formed me a prayer for his *noblesse*, and made my lunge into the momentous whirl, bent, groping, swept from my line again and again, mocked with the lashing and impulsive gale. In this last stint I had but the slant of the wind to guide me, for there was no darkness of house-bulk visible. I plunged forward. My shoes were sometimes caught by the wind as I lifted them and flung aside, I tumbling after. The snow hurled itself upon me and then would pause (as if Death itself were incredulous that I still lived) then close again upon me.

When I should have reached the house it was not there. I groped and felt nothing but the fleeing body of the air. Only the swift murk of night responded to my outstretched

hands. I was lost. I bumped into a blind tree whose limbs were thrashing in an ecstasy of terror. I knew by it that I was on the lane and I followed it by the noise of skeletons that jangled icily in the thrashing maples. To my ebbing sense there loomed but one dim thought: "I must not surrender now. I am near the house. I must not surrender."

So when there came a great assault of snow that threw me down, grossly strangling, and the temptation to lie was wearisome, the engine within me pumped again and drove me up. Above me an icy nightmare rode upon the darkness, but it could not touch me till I willed, and once as I staggered forward I fell against a fence. It led me to the porch.

Oh! the deadness of that house! No light came from door-crack or shuttered window. The door would not yield to me, though I beat my fists warm against the stubborn wood. Against the exhaustless roar my beating made no more effect than a cricket in a thunder-storm. A frenzy seized me. Was I to die on the very threshold? Out there it had seemed infinitely sweet to cuddle down beneath that spruce and drift to nothing like a cloud. But now it was so useless to die. I redoubled my pounding and laughed at my ridiculousness. I bit my lips to keep my senses right side up that were tottering in my head. I pounded with my snow-shoes, hoping that the crack of their *rat-tat* would catch her ear.

Then a new chill fell on me. Suppose that they had all fallen victim to the plague. It was possible, and with the withdrawal of hope my mind went giddy. A swirl of the gale caught at me and in the lightness of my head I feared lest I be gripped by its talons and flown off with into the roaring black. The blast subsided and I was trembling, hugging to the door, my spirit poised in despair on the very threshold of my heart, when I heard a noise inside, the stumbling of feet by the door. Then I did not hear it. Then the door fell from me, opening.

It opened and a gush of heated air swept out to me on a

flood of light that dazzled my eyes, so long used to death. The presence of another dazzled my thought also so long used to the loneliness of dying. I sank, despite my effort, to the door-sill, staring, half sightless, up into a face I thought I knew. It was Touch's but with features hard, that seemed strange to me, and eyes gray, steadily cold, and inhospitable. I tried to rise, but I could not. I saw the tumble of his light hair, and thought that for old time's sake he might give me a hand. But he had stood there unmoving, his features still as steel. Then he uttered some word I could not comprehend, and as I tried to shuffle by him into that golden heaven of light he blocked the doorway with his leg.

Even then the small unfrozen area of my mind was on my errand and I muttered, somehow making my lips move, "I came — for Hallie."

"Very thoughtful," he said, "but she don't need you any more."

"Is she dead, too?" I managed to say.

He looked at me strangely while I balanced on the brink of heaven or hell. Then a queer laugh came from him and he bent to me, a naked hostility upon his lips and whispered, "Yes — she's dead."

"Dead!" The word clicked like a shut door.

"And you can go to hell after her," he said fiercely, seizing my shoulder and exerting a pressure upon it. "But be damned quiet about it."

The light and current of warmth and the leaping and falling of my moods had revived that expectancy within me called living and it sought to avoid a return to the avowed nothingness of the driving death outside. So I struggled. He began to exert a cruel pressure against me, but I held to his leg, to his arms, to the door-jamb, and as I struggled there came before my eyes a picture of a rat that I had drowned once in too little water: how I had to push it down, how it swam, and struggled even as I was struggling, its eyes cast to the light,

while I, growing sick, still held it, until its effort weakened, until it gave that last convulsion and floated, dead, gray belly uppermost. Even so was I failing, and his hands were on my throat.

The end of the struggle is blurred beyond memory. He took pains to be noiseless and I had not the heart to make a sound. I was ashamed to look into his face, for he had once been a friend to me, and I could not bear to see the look of pitiless, rat-killing evilness upon it. He would have done with me sooner had he not taken the pains to make no stir. Yet slowly he got me over the threshold, though I fought for each inch. I had an arm about his leg. He tore it loose. I gripped the sill with a hand. His heel brought blood from it, and then it was, that, shrill like the last voice of a despairing heart, a cry escaped me. It was a cry that stirred him to frenzy, and with a great oath and swing of the fist he silenced it and I felt myself sinking backward into a night that was curiously noiseless and without pain.

Yet not quite noiseless, either. The pricking fingers of the cold must have kept a miniature of my soul alive within me; for I had no sooner sunk into a dim enswathing dream than I became aware of new noises, of fresh light, of sharp voices, and a dull confusion ringing in my brain.

Was I sleeping or was I dead? became the subject of my muddled reasoning. Dead, was my conclusion; for one of those voices was Hallie's, I was confident, and if she was dead, then I must be quite dead, too. Yet I wished to wake to be sure, for there was a heaviness upon my limbs which death was thought to rid us of. My eyelids were so heavy. But the light was increasing and suddenly stood over me. "It is heaven," I thought, and with infinite effort I peeped to see what heaven was like; and found it was Hallie's eyes looking down to mine.

They were her eyes, I knew, yet so troubled. And mine, for all my efforts, were too wearily weighted to stay open a

moment longer. I knew it must be Hallie's hand upon my brow; for though she had never touched me before, I knew none other could be so soft and thrilling. Yet for heaven it was marvelously cold, and for angel voices they spoke in very sharp tones.

"Blood," I heard her exclaim in a voice as distant from me as the far end of a long lake, very faint but clear with anger; "blood! How came fresh blood on him? His hand is bleeding yet."

I heard only a mumble of words and then she spoke again: "I suspect you, Mr. Touch." And while it beat me that he should be in heaven, too, their voices came fainter, and though I struggled not to fade from the hearing of her dear voice, I drifted out into utter blankness.

They must have carried me into a room, for when the curtain of my consciousness began to show transparent I tried to account for the snow-drift having grown so warm, when in reality it was pillows, and why life was so stirring in heaven, when in reality it was Hallie running a devilish, great risk for my sake in countering the devil in Touch. As little by little the mist cleared from my senses I knew that a soft hand was sponging my hurt fingers, and unspeakably tender was its caress. And all the time she was waging an angry debate with him while my body, lying in its half-dream, listened, unreflective.

"I have repeated them," he said angrily.

"And they prove nothing except — except what I am afraid to say."

"Stay afraid. That's the best way for women," he said sinisterly.

"But the blood. You have n't explained it."

"I swear there can be nothing but what I've told you. He must have clawed at the door in his hurry to get in. I swear —"

"Save your soul," she said in a changed voice, with no fear in it, though her hand trembled on mine. "Do you suppose, Mr. Touch, that I have n't seen that, or that?" She pointed to the entrance behind me.

"Well, what do you make of it?" he said with the bravado of one at bay.

"Oh! It is too awful!" she moaned, leaning close over me. "You — you would have been a murderer but for me."

"A very pretty name."

"But there are worse on my tongue. He was your friend once. He saved your life, as you once told me yourself. And now — how false!"

"All's false in war and love, and quit the hysterics. He's not dead yet. 'Murderer'! A very pretty name. Go on and work yourself up into more silliness. Say I killed my rival — though he's probably shamming there on the sofa — but always add I did it for you. Always add I did it for love of you, Hallie, unless you want to outdo me as a liar."

He spoke with much bitterness and very fast.

"I cannot endure you to mention me!" she cried, trembling more.

"You will have to endure more than that," he said menacingly. "What do you suppose I've sweated on this damned farm for but for you?"

"For my father."

He laughed scornfully. "Do you think so? Then I suppose you think that the first brown-skinned boy who comes in the middle of the night calling 'Hallie'—" His words choked him they came so fast. "Do you think I'm standing by and letting him have you?"

"Have I no say?" she demanded fiercely, herself.

"Just this much: You can say now whether you'll have me the regular way with a clergyman and some pretty promises in a church, or someway not quite so regular."

Her hand tightened its grip on mine until it hurt, but the pain was dear to me. "Do you think I'd marry a murderer?" she said slowly.

"Oh, very well!" he said with the old flippant scorn. "Call me that between ourselves. I've always liked your little jokes. And," he added soberly, "I've put up with them because I love you. But God knows it's no time for too much humor."

"If you've had enough, go to bed."

"And leave you and him together! Oh, Hallie!" I burned to hear him mock her. "The dear innocent boy probably knew your dad and Aunt Sallie weren't to home. But why did he choose the middle of the night? I'll have to shapprone you." And he laughed brutally at her.

"Oh, don't!" she said in her distress.

"Beast!" he said mockingly. "Murderer! Nice names for a lover trying to protect his sweetheart. Murderer! And I tried gentle to send him home."

His words had outleapt his caution.

"Ah! You confess it?" she burst out, blazing. "You confess it! I thank him for his coming. He must have known. Or else God sent him."

She leaned over me and I felt her rapid breathing as she scanned my face and my senses flickered into reason as does a spark, tenderly breathed on, come to flame. But I kept my eyes closed, still gathering consciousness and strength, should their quarrel go on.

"Anger me more and neither he nor God can help you a little bit. Lean off of him."

But she did not and he suddenly cried out, "Hallie, will you taunt me beyond my powers?" He came over and stood by us. She made no answer, but I felt an increase in her emotion.

"Hallie!" Still no response.

"Hallie, you foolish girl," and his voice was suddenly

dropped to a calm level, "promise me two things and I'll bother you no more this night. Promise me you'll hush up about him and that some day you'll marry me."

Even in my half-entrance back into life I held my breath.

"Never!" she said, with all her strength.

"Do you mean that?" His passion was groping for utterance in his throat.

"Then by ——!" and he smacked out a hideous oath, "I'll mince about no longer."

"And you pretend to love me?" she cried wildly.

"What do you expect of a man?" he asked, almost gently. "To be so beautiful as you are and think that he'll remain wood. To call his rival into the house and expect him to look on! To say he's a murderer and believe that he'll wait around till he's lynched for it! You've made a fool of me long enough."

She was beginning to cry and it enraged him. "Go on, drop your tears on him. Throw all the sick stuff you want. Throw over a lover for a corpse. But don't blame the love that you've stirred up, for having its way. I'll have one kiss, anyway."

He seized her by the arm as he spoke and she gave a little cry that went like a sword point to my vitals. The sight steadied my poor dazed head. He was trying to draw her lips to his, his fair face working with passion and hers averted in horror.

With some strength that had not been in me I rose, holding to a chair. I had but one impulse—to annihilate him. I raised the chair above my head and brought it, with the addition of hate to gravity, down upon that head I had once so admired. He had not seen, he gave no cry, but with a queer blink of the eyes dropped to the floor, quivered once, then lay insensate, still.

As a bird escapes from the hand, she had fluttered from him falling, visibly trying to pull her wits together—for she



saw that I had few as yet—and saying tremblingly: “Quick, we must tie him, or he’ll kill you.”

But the strength had passed from me and I was of small use while she, returning from the kitchen with a great ball of clothes-line, had soon so entangled the fallen youth in its coils that a sheep-shearer could not have cut him loose in half an hour.

“There, he’s safe—you must sleep,” she said, helping me to the sofa.

“I’ll watch with you,” I remember saying dimly.

But her reply and the little relieved laugh of her were but a blur to me and—to my everlasting shame, as I thought later—I sank into a bottomless slumber, leaving her to the long vigil between us two unconscious men with the vast roar and coldness of the blizzard’s height assailing the thin walls of her security.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE SHORT DAY

**M**Y sleep was broken-paced from the reaction to the fagging day and disastrous night and I swooned from one dream into another. But when I woke it was to a clear mind if to a feeble body. My first waking threw me back into the atmosphere of storm, for the dim gray light, the dulled boom of the wind, and the cold all told me that the great blizzard was still overruling the world.

I raised my head from the pillow and looked on the floor, to encounter the blunt stare of those sand-gray eyes, those empty wells of friendliness that I once had trusted home. He did not blink my look.

"Well, the tables is turned, old man, to say nothing of the beds," he said. "I feel as if I'd need a rising-bell to get me up."

I had nothing to say to him and so I kept silent.

"It's crippling cold down here, Mac. I'll trade with you."

"I'll see that you don't freeze," I said.

"Now the fuss is over, are n't you going to let me up?"

"Who said the fuss was over?"

"Oh, of course if you're going to slam some more furniture on me, now's your chance, while I'm tied. Try a bureau." He waited, then: "My leg's crippled again like that night in the tavern. It aches awful, which I suppose will refresh you to hear."

"You never judged me very right, Touch."

"Let me make one more pitiful attempt," he said scorn-

fully. "I believe you are that noble you'd give me a cigarette. Now, am I right?"

"Where'll I find them?" I asked.

I knelt down by him and pulled his cigarette papers and tobacco can out of his pocket.

"Now watch out," he continued, coolly sarcastic. "I'm going to judge you again. I'm going to risk saying you don't know how to roll one."

He was quite right, for except when there were two or three fellows together and it was partways companionable I could see no sense to the things.

"If you'll untie my hands a moment I'll show you," he offered.

"Are n't you sure you're under-judging me?" I said, trying for his exact coolness.

"Not if you're afraid to do it," he replied, as if satisfied. "But I suppose it won't take you more than all morning to learn. Now listen."

And he set about telling me how to hold the slippery paper, how to administer the fragrant mixture, how to roll, and lick down, and finish out, and then, giving a sarcastic grunt, he said, when I'd labored over one:

"It'll draw just like a wet stocking. Try again."

"The devil I will!" I exclaimed, weary of his condescension. "I'm going to see my girl."

"Kiss her good morning for me," he said, nothing daunted, "and tell her I like my eggs turned on a cold morning."

I opened the door into the kitchen and was met by the aroma of coffee and the lovely noises of bacon in a sizzle. She was shaking some eggs in the scrambling-pan and turned at the door's opening. It seemed a long distance to her and my head acted as if it was trying to spin me into a corner; I tottered toward her, and quickly she had reached me, holding me up and giving me a look in which I tried to separate the proportions of mother, comrade, and sweetheart.

"You should n't have got up before you 'd had food," she said.

"I could n't bear his eyes, Hallie."

"Never mind. I'll make you comfortable out here," and she had me sit in a big chair near the stove while she finished the preparations for breakfast. My head swirled now and then, but I had only to collect my thoughts about her to have it rally, and surely there is sufficient interest in the sight of a woman in the midst of her womanliest work — home-keeping. And then my thoughts would swing out into that blue sky of fancy, where she and I were mates, till I wondered why she did not cry out over her pans for the very loveliness of the things I was thinking as I watched. It seems to me that love thoughts should be twin thoughts that grow spontaneously in the soil of each other's mind. But often I gripped the chair's arms to prevent my slipping away.

"There," she said, bringing me some toast and coffee, "you have been brave."

I had to laugh. "I? Brave? And you a-watch the whole night through, like the lighthouse-keepers' wives that Robert Louis told me about. Oh, Hallie!"

"Watch your cup," she said. "It's spilling."

At first she was for not eating with me, being a nurse instead. But for obstinacy try to beat a healthy invalid like me! I refused all nourishment until she drew up a chair suitably close and had her breakfast mouthful for mouthful with me.

And what a breakfast that was! — the first time that I had ever broken bread alone with the girl I loved. The kitchen was on the south side of the house and so sheltered from the wind under which the outer world was reeling. But the view was all one drift of snow. The windows were deep with frosty fur and when we scratched an eyehole to see out all we saw was the immense gray wall of a snow breaker, ever about to fall, yet ever towering. Again and again all

would be involved in white velocities of snow, but with us behind the barricade it was cozy and if there had not been that living threat lying so tragic to me in that other room I could have been the happiest man in the whole white world. As it was, there were four at our feast of eggs and bacon and her coffee: she and I and the two dumb guests seated by, my love and my sorrow—my love for her, my sorrow for him, whom I had once loved and now feared. And of neither did I dare yet speak.

So while the storm pressed against the house, while the voices of its tremendous passion cried in the chimney, while he lay noiseless and uncomplaining in his ropes, we sat beneath the genial glow of the lamp and spoke of the storm, of her father who had taken Aunt Sallie in to Saranac and had been caught there, spoke of many a thing but talked of none that really lay within the lobes of our hearts, until I could bear it no longer and cried, "Hallie, what are we to do with him?"

She instinctively looked toward the room. "It is what has not been out of my mind a single instant all the night. How can we keep him when he tried—tried to do—"

"It is death to venture out. We cannot put him out."

"Oh, why did Dad leave! I told him there was a storm making and now those cows are needing fodder."

"I will tend to them," I said, rising, steadied by the food in me and the new strength of her frontier-like example. For it braces a man to see a woman brave. But when I had opened the door and saw the first cliff of snow to be surmounted, heard the wild scream of wind about the corner, and knew that a living being would last about five minutes in the smoke and frozen flame of that unintermitting blast, I let her dissuade me. "They can go another day," she said commandingly, and, chilled by that short look, I turned closer to the fire. I also let her prepare Touch's food alone, but I insisted upon carrying it in, and she was

very willing. Yet, when it came to helping to get him on the sofa and to wrapping him up, I needed her. His leg had indeed been hurt, but he was brave with it, so brave that it was a painful meeting. To my surprise, he said no word, nor she, nor I. It was like the carrying of a casket, I thought—for I had helped at some of the grippe funerals—to lift this boy, dead now to our sympathies, to whose inner soul we were now insensible, and place him, meaningless, upon the lounge. We loosed his hands, though seeing to it that they could do no mischief with the knots.

Just at the end, when she had seen that he was warm enough, he broke out with: "I think you'd better close the door, Hallie."

"It'll be warmer for you with it open."

"But it's only clothes-line you've done this parcel up in and it'll make it unsafe for you."

"What do you mean?" I said, falling into his trap. "You look tight enough."

"Nothing tantalizes me like hearing kisses," he said, giving a diabolic laugh.

The gray light that came into the eyes of him made me realize our situation, and when we went back into the kitchen and sat in the twilight of noon, which was scarcely strong enough to do the little chores by, we breathed not only the thunder of the storm which crashed against the frail half-buried house but also the sinister atmosphere of him in there. It was as if a double cloud had settled on us, and I felt dull anger that his personality should still come between me and her who was so dear to me. This time she allowed me to help her with the dishes.

No sooner had we had our lunch and cleared up afterward than evening began to fall. And after I had lit the lamp a great coziness fell upon us.

"Tell me more about those lighthouse wives," said she, looking up from some mending. "It is very like our situa-

tion, with this wild ocean beating in on us. Listen to that!" I listened, not only to the roar of a rocking universe, but to the beat of my heart, and I determined to venture something.

"It has a pretty sound — 'lighthouse *wives*.' Hasn't it?"

"I mind a picture of one, so tall, so straight, so white!"

"But not so far around that you can't get your arms about them."

"My picture was."

"Mine was n't."

"I'm talking about the lighthouses."

"And I about the *wives*."

She colored a little. Then I lost what little head I had left over from the day before and put my arms clean about her, mending and all, as I had wanted to do many a time before.

"Anson MacIntyre!" she cried, her voice big with remonstrance. "Now, you've spoiled it!" Her strong, capable hands gripped mine and shoved them back. "You've spoiled it."

"Spoiled? What's spoiled?" I asked, taken somewhat aback by her vehemence.

"This — our party. I — was trying to forget something."

"Forget what?" I asked, angry at having got into a scrape.

"You know," she said, looking into her mending.

"I know?" I said, as suddenly upset as she had been.

"I know nothing whatever of what you're talking."

"Aunt Sallie said that where there's so much smoke there must be a little fire."

"Whatever are you talking about?" I asked harshly.

"Tess Mitten, if you must know," she said bluntly, the color of the red table-cover. "And I was trying to forget it, as long — as long as you brought me the medicine."

"How'd you know I brought the medicine?" I inquired blankly.

"Why, you kept talking about it last night and bringing it out of your pocket. There it is, behind the stove, when you want to take it back. I'll not need it."

"Hallie, how can you be so cruel?" I rubbed my forehead, dazed at the sudden plunge from the peak of content into this trouble.

"But — but I did want to thank you — before we parted." She turned her face away and I knew there were tears in her voice. "I know the risk you took."

My poor troubled senses could not have said anything had the whole world been dissolving, and she went on, "I thank you, Anson MacIntyre."

There was a quiet and her head was held close over her work and I could hear my happiness falling from height to height like a little brook and never able to get back. My head was very light or I would not, likely, have done the foolishness I now did. But with those hopeless final tones of "I thank you, Anson MacIntyre," ringing in my head I did it. I walked to the door, and opened it, confronting once more the surging dark, this time with my love behind me.

The air scorched me and the myriad pale flowers of the white field whispered for me to bury my hurt head in them. I felt in my pocket as by habit, but I had left the talisman in the house and I was glad. I did not want to remember him or his gospel of courage. But the return wave of thought brought the picture of Touch and I knew that no matter how much she hated me I could not forsake her till her dad came. Still, in a misery of self-consciousness I stared into the night, the death-stream whipping by, until I felt a hand on my shoulder and a low voice crying, "Mac, Mac! what are you doing?"

I could not answer her.



"Forgive me, Mac."

He is a fool who learns not the first time where his happiness lies. I wheeled on the gale, the renewal of life in my heart driving the blood back into my arteries, and I said, "You forgive me, Hallie, for a fool."

She did not need words but slammed the door and the empty foolishness was closed with it and we stood there facing each other. Who was to speak? What was to be said?

As if to ease the situation I heard Touch calling me. Almost with relief I turned to him. I went to him and closed the door. How queerly life shakes us up! I was with one who had tried to end my life and felt relief, at the same time wondering how I could ever again face her on the other side of the door who had just saved it.

"Havin' a little love-scrap?" he asked. I did not reply for wretchedness but set about quickening his fire.

"Need n't answer. I heard a good deal. I'll tell you this, MacIntyre, I believe in fair play."

"That's plain in all your actions," I said, with a trace of his scorn.

"Well, you know what I mean, and I'll make this bargain with you. I'll give you Hallie if you'll give me a decently rolled cigarette."

"That strikes me as being exactly your notion of a bargain."

"Dog-gone it!" he said. "That Stevens man has certainly taught you how to talk back. But do you feel safe when I can move that much?" and he wriggled his foot about an inch. "I'll go you more generous than that, you Scotch bargainer: for two cigarettes I'll teach you how to handle her."

"I'll roll you a thousand if you'll agree to keep her name from your tongue," I said.

"That's a go. Shake." But when I did not move he added with a bitter laugh: "Oh, I'll excuse."

It was strange that I, the innocent, could not meet the steady brilliance of his unbelievable look—for thinking of past times.

"Don't spit too much on 'em; don't get 'em too tight. Has her dad come back yet?"

I told him of the hugeness of the storm, and having thought up something to say to Hallie, left him to the loneliness of his imprisonment, returning almost eagerly to the cozy place where Hallie was.

"What do you know about cigarettes, Hallie?" I asked.

"Touch smokes them. Why?"

"You and I are going to be the busy cigarette-rollers in this next while." And we were. I drew my chair up to hers, and we had a contest in the unusual art. With infinite pains we would hold the papers just so, pour out the mixture until our delicate estimate was satisfied, and then would the trouble begin.

"Look at that, Mac," she would say, "as lean as butter-milk," or, "Yours, yours, Mac! It sags in the middle!" or "Does n't that look like a little orphan cigarette!" and off she'd go into a fit of laughter which was my design more than old Touch's cigarettes. And when her face shone with gaiety it was all I could do to sit in my chair, holding myself as rigid as a rapids-shooter in a canoe, in order not to overstep my bounds. This time I would make no mistake. And yet in the very happiest moment a word slipped from me that I feared while it was slipping, for I said, "Hallie, are you still forgetting I'm me?"

"No, Mac."

"Then let me say this one thing and then I'll shut up."

"Is it necessary, Mac?" She had grown very tense.

"It is necessary, because we may have days of this and it is on the tip of my teeth every minute. It's a promise I want you to give."

"I can't think of any promise I can give," she said very low.

"It's a promise that you won't believe evil of me until you have proof."

She looked up with a little divine smile. "But I don't want the proof," she said.

"Proof that there has been no evil."

"Oh, that it was possible!" she sighed.

"You cannot look at me in the face and refuse to promise," I said.

She looked at me and I at her, for the first full minute of our lives, and I prayed that the walled chambers of our souls might melt into that boundless openness of perfect understanding. And when she dropped her gaze I heard the words, "Yes, Mac." And I knew that I had seen an angel.

In the same guise she carried in those cigarettes to Touch, I wondering how out of our curious occupation had sprung the sudden flower of peace for me.

Imprisoned by such blackness is it amazing that we two should have sought to relieve our hours from dismay? Is it strange that we laughed over the delicious meal, not thinking of the cattle in the cold, nor of the worries that were abroad in the world? We supped like squirrels in a nest for snugness, drawn near the stove, on venison done to a neat brown with gravy, and an omelet and tea and some jam of wild raspberries — the sweetest meal, save one, I have ever eaten — and thought nothing of what composed it. And to hear her call me "Mac" was as beautiful to me as the blithest bit of bird song to silence-weary ears.

It, and indeed most of the day, had been a sort of unwedded housekeeping, a fresh joy in every minute, and a thing I advise to all these new-fangled marriers who rush into weddings before they ever see their wives set a table to them. It was a sunrise of living to me, of real living, for

no man really lives until he is in love and none can be said really to love until he can renounce also. And, for the grace of your understanding, was I not renouncing then?

So I threaded her needles for her, since the mending must go on, and told her of many a thing that Robert Louis had said about her, though being discreet against another mistake on lighthouse wives. And all at once I thought of the talisman, safe in my mackinaw pocket, and when I had got it she exclaimed with delight at its beauty. And, indeed, for a compass it was the fittest little flat box, like a watch, of silver and yet not so staring bright that a woodsman need blush to use it.

"It is a new kind of silver," said she. "See there!" And she pointed to the word "Silverado" on the back.

"Silverado!" I laughed. "That's where he went on his honeymoon. And that's why—" I stopped short, having almost said it. But she pretended not to notice.

"He is very fond of you, is n't he?" she asked.

"He is very good to me."

"Fond, I said," she cried emphatically. "It took more than goodness for him to risk being sick that time he was a peddler."

And, once on this topic, we immediately fell into a good hour's talk on Robert Louis, and ever back to the prone figure in the next room whose presence lay just behind our thoughts as winter stalks behind Indian Summer.

"And you were very fond of him, too?" she asked once, sympathetically.

"He was my first friend — the first fellow I thought was friends to me."

"But now you've found another."

"Yet the happiness of to-morrow can never quite make up for the unhappiness of to-day; not quite."

"I'm glad I'm a woman," she sighed.

"And so am I," said I, though partly to myself, not know-

ing whether it was a remark in bounds; and then I sighed too. For friendship seemed so impossible to regulate and equalize. Twice now had I found friends and twice I had shared such small portions of their life, the one because he was so wayward, the other because of his greatness. I wondered if it would always be the same: that I should be something to another, that another should be everything to me; and tragedy of separation the outcome. It was good that God had put love in the world, and I turned to look at my girl.

"Life, Hallie," I said, "is like a big pack. Friends carry it alternately, but lovers share it at the same time."

"I should say it was like a stove — no good unless you put some fresh wood in." And she laughed, and I put the wood in, and decided that I could try a hand at being less melancholy myself.

"I wonder how soon Dad'll make his way through that," and she sent a questioning glance at the window, which shook with the tread of the white hussars outside. "What a terrible storm!"

"I expect him," I said gaily, "in just about a week, at this rate. There has never been a blizzard like this. But he is safe in town and you are safe here. The only person in danger is — me."

"And the cattle."

"But if I am to weather this terrible storm I think you ought to make me rules of conduct."

She glanced at me cheerfully with a "Yes, indeed!"

"First, how near I may come to saying what I want."

"Keep a yard away, sir, at the very nearest," she said, laughing.

"And never mention a certain small word except under the breath."

"And be God-fearing enough to stick to your word," she reproved.

"Nor tolerate the thought of — what I'm dreaming."

"Mac! You're just trying to be punished."

"And we ought to think of punishments," I went on; "for naturally it is very hard for a fellow to be never saying what he's thinking."

"It seems so."

"So what would you suggest — what penalty for, say, a careless little thing like — hands?"

"A very severe one," she said, rising, and interrupting me.

"It is lucky I feel so much stronger," I said. "Pop always said I had a strong composition."

"Constitution, he meant," and she drew our talk off into safer lanes. But for that parcel of minutes we had forgot the horrors out and in. And if it is woman who is the conservative party in such matters, it is woman who is the most practical in others. For when it came bedtime it was she who mentioned putting something in Touch's milk to make him sleep. It was she who set off to put my room to rights, and it was she, when a frozen current of air leaped from a door hastily opened and closed again, who said in an anxious voice: "It's too fearfully cold in either of the rooms to sleep in."

"Well, who wants to sleep!" I said, loving her bright, disheveled head, as so befitted the day's end.

"I for one and you for another. You need it."

"Then we shall," I said, laughing, for there was such a pressure of joy upon me that I would have agreed to any contradiction.

"But where?" she asked ruefully.

"Here, of course. If it's the only habitable room, then we'll have to inhabit it, won't we?"

"Yes," she said very doubtfully but very sweetly. "I suppose so. Yet —"

"Well, we have our rules," I laughed, "and punishments."

It'll be the same thing as a sleeping-car that Robert Louis told me about, where they hang up curtains and everybody sleeps as if they were in church — on the benches."

While she was feeding and fixing our prisoner I got the clothes-horse and spread it with the ironing-cloth, and pulled and contrived to push her bed out into the room on one side of it and on the other I rigged up a kind of cot with quilts. In the space of time that it takes a hen to settle down on the roost I had the kitchen neatly dormitoried off into two, the clothes-horse for the equator with the stove for its sun, and each of us in our different hemisphere nestled down into warmth. For a while we exchanged laughs over the equator and then by her quiet breathing I fancied that she slept.

But not so I. Life was running now to blizzard time, and while the red cracks in the stove cast fantastic lights upon the walls the most of it was dark. So, thought I, is the morrow. There were problems to be solved I knew not how, and even my coming pleasures had to be faced with some resolution. Yet as sleep laid her languorous blanket of forgetfulness over me, as there faded from me that sense of the storm which now for thirty hours had swept the world, I drifted into a season where there were no snows and saw a green swell of forest, a stream laughing over granite between high banks of bloom, a tent merged with the green dusk of evening, a bower of balsam boughs cut fresh for the bridal party, the lady half of which was busying herself before the supper fire while I her lord —

A short day had ended.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### "DETERMINED, DARED, AND DONE"

I AWOKE from a dream conversation with Robert Louis in the Hunter's Home, as he had always called the Bakers'. It had been very vivid, beginning with a lesson on cigarettes, which merged into a lecture on the effect of Edinburgh weather on widowers, with a great deal of nonsense to match. But through all ran the feeling of his presence, and as his dream features, leanness, depth of eye, and all faded into the waking spectacle of equatorial clothes-horse and my new world, I found myself still repeating his last words: "Mac, it must be determined, dared, and done." What the affair was which must be determined, dared, and done I could not remember, even if it had been mentioned, which was unlikely. But the formula stuck with me and I decided to apply it to the effort of arising, which, contrary to my usual humor, required some initiative to accomplish.

I spied through a crack in the equator and found that Hallie had been up some while, that the stove was chuckling to itself, and that breakfast was awaiting my pleasure to be born out of several pots and pans. But there was no usual morning vacancy in me. My head was as heavy as if Touch had slept on it half the night. But he was in his place, still drowsy with her thoughtfulness in drugs.

"You're a nice girl," I called to her. "Why did n't you wake me?"

"You'll have to work hard enough when you do get up.



It's fearfully cold and I'm worried about Dad's cows. It'd be bad enough to have mere cattle frozen. But Dad's! I think he loves — well, I won't say that! It's mean. But I think he *understands* them better than he does me."

"I'll bed them down warm," I assured her, wondering how I was going to get my shoes on for the throb in my head. But when I had washed in a basin with the ice clinking in it and had swallowed some of her coffee and had opened the door, some of the old zest set my blood a-going and I found myself repeating that dream motto of his: "It must be determined, dared, and done."

The wind had switched into a point north of northwest, according to my talisman, and was emptying out of a green sky with the whistle of outer space in its throat. Hallie and I stood a moment, watching in wonder as the snow wraiths came swirling and spouting by between us and the barn. Towers of crystal spray cloaked in a silver mist spiraled by, succeeded by low, glittering sheets of hissing white. The mercury in the doorway said thirty-two below.

"Mac," she said, "it's still too strong. Don't go."

"Have something hot ready for me, Hallie," I said, "while I dig a tunnel through the first drift. It must be done soon or there's no use doing it at all."

The gale leaping down out of the blank skies had swept a broad lane bare for many yards, but also heaped me up a beautiful white marble mountain by the barn. While I shoveled into this the ice particles bit with the violence of fire and the cold seeped into my blood despite my wildest working. But there is a rejuvenating power in cold and when at last I found myself in the stable, where the cattle smoked with frost, the misery in their eyes made me forget my own and I settled into the routine of saving them.

That was a morning to which the memory does not gladly return. I carried water and hot mash out, bore freezing hens and a dying calf in. At one end of my trip I had their

looks of gratitude to reward me and at the other waited Hallie, solicitous mistress of the occasion, always with the word of praise, of encouragement. I was able to keep from her the fact of my leg-weariness and the weight upon my chest. I would have taken down the barn and carried it in piecemeal across that howling funnel of sharp hell if she had asked it. And there was another reason, too. I hoped that the distress I was under would come to her father's ears and earn me some of the favor he had granted Touch once for admiring his old cows. Yet the cold was getting me, the stove's heat seemed no heat at all, and as I carried and pushed my body through that swift scything of the sickle wind a cry of pain escaped me more than once.

And near the end the fangs struck home. I was in the barn when it seemed as if the scalp was tightening on my head and that all the heat of my body was huddling there. A hundred little snakes of chills scudded up my spine and spread over my body and I came into the profoundest shivering. The house to which I must go back seemed mortal distant through the fume and fury of the gale and I thought of my mother, the mother I had needed but had never known, and my body cried out for such a one to press me to her, to warm me and say there was some health, some hope in the homeless, snow-swept world.

I leaned against a stall post, my body in a storm of chills, my head oppressed with heaviness, and behind my eyes formed a picture, clear against the dullness of all else — a picture of my mother's house as I had seen it two days before at the beginning of the storm, with her lying in bed, no longer drawn, tormented, and resentful, but forgiving, *dead*.

Whatever such mirages of the spirit may be I have not the wits to wonder, even; and perhaps we shall never know until we have reached that sensitiveness to things beyond, which is known as death. But there was a surety in that

vision which left me in no doubt that she had ceased to be. Through waves of throbbing heat and of cold it came over me, that she, wistful as I had found her and implacable as she had sent me away, was beyond reach of assurance from me. And then I knew how close to the inner longing of my heart had she been who was even now dead in that lonely room. I leaned against the manger in the lowest misery of my life and sobbed until my grief had ebbed somewhat, leaving a lightness in my head and the dull knowledge that I must get back to the house or perish.

Once more I met the swordsmanship of the white wind, once more opened the door, once more sought strength from Hallie's eyes, though now all was dim and she seemed distant, though not two arm's-lengths away.

"Why, Mac, you poor boy! you are sick!" she cried, taking my hand.

"No — only tired, Hallie — but awful tired."

She put her hand on my forehead and began to chafe my great icy hands in hers, talking about herself being crazy to allow me to go out; and what was a stableful of cattle compared to her friend, and a lot more that I could not follow while she was easing me of my shoes. I had no strength to stop her and indeed must have made a lolling dead-weight of a person to be got into bed as she managed to do — though I have no remembrance how.

Touch, I remember, tried to come into my head as I was going to sleep, but I pushed him back as had he pushed me into the utter darkness, and when I next woke it was much later, for the lamp was lit. I heard the kitchen clock tick-tocking, felt the warm blanket against my cheek, and dimly made her out, knitting in the chair by my side. Over everything was a profound stillness as if the storm had not been in this world, a delicious quiet as of summer, and twilight, and ripples of a lake shore.

"Hallie?" I managed to mumble.

"Don't talk," she said, looking at me. So I dozed away, content to be commanded by her, waking, dozing, and waking to find her always there beside me. Sometimes the lamp would be lit and sometimes it would be day, which puzzled me, and so did the absolute silence after the storm's long roar.

"The wind has gone," she said. "It was fifty below this morning."

"What morning is it?" I asked, confused, but she only smiled. How my body ached and burned! How hard it was to keep from twisting and writhing! Any who has had the gripe knows that! My one solace was to open my eyes from time to time and find her there by me.

And once she was not there and I felt a cold draft. But when I looked again she was there, ghost-like, with a rifle across her knees.

At length, after interminable dreamings and startings, I must have gone out of my head for fever and she determined to bathe me. I remember the sponge sliding down an arm and the relief to see her face through the haze of fever. I remember a relief comparable to putting down a heavy pack after a long carry, and then nothing. And it was that night that her nursing held my body from the grave, while every noise she heard on the outside she feared was Touch, for—you might as well know now—he had escaped us.

I learned that days after, from her father. For when I came out of my fever, weak but clear-headed at last, he was sitting by me. A soft sunlight came through frostless panes and on the table sat my bottle of medicine, the one I had brought for Hallie, empty. This interplay of chance in the world is an incalculable thing. If she had not had for me that which I had brought for her I should

have died: I am ready to believe that there is no bread cast upon the waters which does not return to sustain him who cast it.

"There, my boy!" said he, proudly; "I knew you'd come around all right. It's all in the nurse, and you've the best in Essex County."

"Where is she?" I asked faintly. The easing of my pain had left me in a soft languor like autumn sunshine on the ruins of a mill.

"She's in the other room."

"Not with Touch," I said quickly. "I know she's not with him."

"You're right! you're right! There's none of us been with that villain since he skedaddled. It's a great story, a great story! But she said not to tell you until you were stronger."

"See how strong I am," I said, trying to rise, and barely concealing my giddiness by lying back very promptly. "Anyway, hearing's less bad for one than thinking."

"That's right. That's sense. Well, to make it short, it was this way. You know those cigarettes you made for him. And you know you'd always light them for him and never let him have a match. Well, he went and burned through that rope with his old cigarette and got loose; and if she had n't felt the draft through the door where he'd opened the window and skedaddled on your snow-shoes, he might've got in and done you up. Anyway, she says she guessed it quick as lightning and got down one of my guns and locked all the doors, carrying that gun around with her. And that was the night you was the worst, she says. Now, was n't that plucky of her?"

Tears, I think, had come into my weak eyes to think of the danger she had run for my sake and I could only dumbly assent and I must have slept again, for the next time I looked about she was hovering near me.

"Hallie — Hallie!" I cried and forgot how I was to say it and she put her finger on my lips to silence them, and I kissed it, and the very nearness of her was worth a month of doctoring to me.

The next sleep I had, after light food, was very delicious, and the merry sun woke me. The smell of morning was in the air, the glint of light suggested full carnival outdoors, and on the breakfast tray sat food and I knew that I was well. She sat with me while I ate and in the midst of her telling me the Touch business all over there came a messenger, Sandy Fisher, from the Baker Farm with all sorts of messages and inquiries, for they had been sent word of my safety (I found later) and among them this note from him:

*Hunter's Home*

DEAR MACINTYRE:

The news is all good and don't hurry the convalescence, for time is as essential to a cure as it is to the constitution of a calendar. I am the same feeble vain tottering production that you left. Valentine is still prostrate. Gudewife Baker and her man are suffering from a bad attack of the penny whistle. But, then, what am I to do? I cannot write the clock around and the cold remains beyond belief. I have often suffered less at the dentist's.

We need you for the shovelling. One drift, the one you will be able to use next summer for a cold-house, threatened that last day to engulf the residence. We need you to reestablish a rural delivery of the mails. And I need you, lad, to call in when the black dog begins to howl. But women have some rights and I don't begrudge Hallie hers. I wonder if I was half grateful enough to you: you let your kindnesses come on me so easily.

Tell the sweet lady for me that all peddlers are n't dead yet, and that I shall, in any other but a professional way, be glad to be of service to her. Read much affection and interest between these twaddly lines, lad, and know that I am

Your friend,

ROBERT LOUIS

It was nearly a week that I lay there fallow, recovering, eating the most delicious things, and alternating the horny-handed conversation of Mr. Brewster with Hallie's cheery talk.

If it was a bit impersonal I had but to look at her standing by with song in her eyes and await the supreme day that was to come to me.

One morning her dad came in to me with something on his mind, and I guessed it was about my mother. I had said no word about her, the vision having told me all. He began in a roundabout way, saying, "By Gad, Mac, you did surprise me that first day I come in!"

"How's that?"

"It was the second mornin' after the wind fell before I could beaver my road across the fields, but I was n't worryin' about Strawberry Farm or the cattle with the job being looked after by Hallie and that rascal Touch. So I open the door gay enough and see her sitting here. 'Heigho, honey!' I cries, stomping the snow off. 'Heigho, honey! everything all right?' And she puts her hand up for quiet and I see her put down a rifle — a rifle, mind — pale as the pillow-case.

"Don't talk so loud, Dad," she whispers. Now that's some greeting, ain't it?

"What, old Touch ill?" I asked, stepping over to the queer-rigged bed, and then I give one bellow. 'Surprisin' Lord!' I says, 'a changeling!'

"I think even Hal, worn and worried, laughed at me, I was so weak in the wits for a minute. 'How's this?' I ask. 'I drive Aunt Sallie to town. I leave Mr. Ed Touch in charge. It snows. I come back and find Mr. Anson MacIntyre.'

"Then she tells me about your bringing the medicine. I ask about the rifle. She tells me about Touch's skedaddling. I ask her about the cattle, which had looked all right to me, and she tells me about them and I burst right out with, 'Congratulations, Hal! This looks like progress. I allays liked young MacIntyre.'

"Sshhh, Dad!" she says; 'he must n't be annoyed.'

"'If it annoys the boy to tell him I like him he must be weak.'

"'You must hitch up again and get the doctor,' she says, like reading off an order, 'and don't be put off by any excuses; and when you take him back you can tell the Bakers and Mr. Stevenson that the worst is over; and on the way back please stop at his mother's and inquire.'

"'Are there any other little errands?' I asked. 'Dawdlin' around like that all day makes a man over-lazy.'

"She reaches up and gives me a fat kiss which I'd like to bet had been accumulating for you (only she's such a lady) and I go out on my errands."

Here he left off his talk, which had been rattled off with a false gaiety like a summer's day in March.

"I've got a big debt to pay you and Hallie," I said.

"Debt? And you risking double pneumonia for my cows! Has the disease shook your mind, boy? I guess me and Hallie can keep accounts better'n that. As far as I can see it's going to take a lifetime to pay you off."

"I want her for a lifetime," I said, feeling shy at the boldness.

He evidently took it in; but he said nothing, which I took as an ill omen, finally bringing himself to say: "There's one thing, Mac, I've been carrying around on my chest near a week now, and since you're all man, I take it, I'm going to unload. It's about your ma. She—"

"Died in the storm," I said calmly, taking the words out of his mouth.

"How did you know?" he asked sharply, and I told him of my vision in the stable.

"There! there! it is as I said!" he exclaimed excitedly. "If a man stays around them critters long enough, he gets clear-eyed and natural. It's the life God thinks the best on or He wouldn't've chose a manger for His Son to be born



in. Well, that defeats me! And you've known all this while." And, greatly moved, he went out to tell Hallie.

The days passed with a fadeless satisfaction in having Hallie within speaking-distance, and yet there was an undercurrent of anxiety, too, for both she and her father, while painstakingly polite and even tender to me, withheld that final familiarity which one who hopes some day to be of the family is so quick to detect and revel in. I resolved to find out from him how matters stood. The next day he greeted me with, "Hi, Mac! You're a day better, I take it." He had my clothes in his arms. "Nurse says there's a chair by the fire for you and that I'm to coddle you into it after coaxing some of these on you."

I was a trifle shaky at first, but he was full of talk about the thaw which had set in, about how I had saved his cows, an unwearying topic to him, and I saw no chance until he said, "Have you reached twenty yet, Mac?"

"I'll be twenty next February."

"February next?" he laughed. "And this is March. Oh, well! I married at nineteen, myself." My heart gave a great jump at that.

"It's an example I'm for following," I said breathlessly.

"It was that I had in mind," he said soberly, helping me with my shoes. "There was one thing I did n't tell you when we was talking about your ma. Something — something else happened in that storm, my boy. Your daughter died."

"My daughter?" I cried shakingly. "My daughter? I have no daughter." And my voice stopped on the up-cry, my mind freezing with dismay at the lie some one had started.

"No," said Mr. Brewster, "she died in the storm. But Tess, she got back to your ma's before your ma died and I seen her there. She looked fair dragged out, Mac, and she said you was to come back soon as you was cured."

"It's trick to get more money from me," I said, pretty forcibly for a sick man. "I never had anything to do with her — that way, Mr. Brewster."

My vehemence surprised him and he put his arm around me to steady me to the chair. The sun lay yellow on the window-sill, but the day had swung dark for me, and I fancied the stubborn light of disbelief coming into his eyes.

"You did n't?" he said. "We seen you hugging her in the road and you've said you paid board for her at your ma's, and the little kid comes. And babies don't come, Mac, just like woman's talk: there's a reason."

"It's a lie!" I shouted to him. "It's a wrong she's done me."

"It's usually considered the other way round," said he. "You need n't to mind telling me, Mac. We was all young once — only, perhaps, luckier." He winked at me with that cheeriness that covered him as good humor covers an apple and I put my face in my hands and groaned.

"Leave the ravin' to them, Mac. You can't help it. I've broke in some pretty mean animals, but I never had a meaner time than when she was ravin' to me, and she swore it'd be all about the Lake how you abused her if you did n't make it right. You're good-lookin' and o' course they all make for you, and equally o' course there's only one way out now for a white man, and that's your kind, son."

"How's that?"

"How's that? Why, do your duty by her, and get married public."

"Marry?" I said in horror. "Her? Do you still believe *her* ahead of me?"

He seemed a little nonplussed by my tone, but evidently his belief was unchanged. In a surge of anger I got to my feet, crying: "Then I won't stay in your house. Let me go!" He was coaxing me back into the chair. "I'll go to the clean woods. Let me out. You've poisoned Hallie's mind,

too." We were engaged in a one-sided struggle, for I was still pretty weak. And with a promptness almost as if she'd been stationed the other side the door the latch lifted and in stalked my girl, a high wrath blazing from her eyes. She quickly put her hand on her father's arm, saying: "Dad, are you crazy? What are you doing? He is all hot again. *Stop it!*"

At that command we did stop, foolish as pantry-robbers.

"He brought it on himself," said he, sheepishly.

"For shame, after all he has done for us! Go out to your calves. You can understand them." It was the first time I had ever seen her angry with him and I felt both shame and exultation. "Go. I found Boskie out of the pen. He'll catch cold. Run out where you can't talk them sick."

At the mention of his beloved calf I saw the shine of his true love, as great if not greater than for us humans, come to his face and rule it. "Boskie?" he said huskily. "Why, I just shut him in."

"Go out and shut him in again then and leave me with Mac."

Pulling on his cap, he hastily went, and as the door slammed she said:

"Does it make some amends that I told a most awful fib for you, Mac? Boskie is in his pen as tight as a tooth."

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to steel myself against her. "Your father will think you have caught the practice from me. He called me a liar."

"Oh, Mac! I cannot think that!"

"He did!" I said, feeling my hold on my steeliness ebbing.

"Mac, you are all wrought up and tired. Let's just sit in the sunshine and not talk."

"But I can't stay — not quiet."

"And you can't go." She had tucked the blanket about my feet. "So there."

"But he believes a dreadful thing of me."

"I can convince him he's wrong."

"*You* can!" I exclaimed, looking into the violet starlight of her eyes. "But you believe it, too."

"Not any longer," she said.

"How's that?" I said in a voice I did not recognize.

"I listened." Then, more faintly: "At the door. It is a woman's way."

I began to comprehend. It was as if I had come over the brow of life's hill and was seeing a wonderful new prospect before me, clear in the sunlight of that magic noon.

"It is you who are slow to believe now," she smiled.

"It is a man's way," I said, "to seek immediate proof — of miracles."

"Is it a miracle? — You are so fine," she said.

"I come to you free," I said. "Will you come to me?"

As the lily opens at dawn her glance lifted and wedded in utter faith with mine. And as I felt the first yielding of her answering lips I knew that we had entered an ancient sanctuary together.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### HOW TO CONVALESCENCE

**A**LL the past pleasures of all my life, hunted for by some pleasure-hunting bee and distilled into golden pleasure-combs of sweetness, could not have equaled the smooth delight of the next fortnight. Outdoors quiet suns melted down the vast prairies of snow and brought the shingled roofs to the smoking-point. Or great clouds swung up into mild skies and were flung down again by drying winds, while early in the morning the eaves outside my window were made musical by the drip of icicles.

With April my strength came more quickly, so that there were mornings when I could sit on the sunny bench watching Hallie wade out with food for her hens, flinging back a look at me with love unspoken in it, her hair blowing in the wind, the lucky wind, and the poise of her in a gust minding me of a birch courted by a breeze.

And at last the day did dawn when I was my whole self again, could put on my arctics and hold the basket for her while she collected the eggs, could carry in the stove-wood, could help wield the shuttle that wove the fabric of daily life at Strawberry Farm. And in that weaving she and I were made each other's in a thousand ways by homely duties shared. Being in love passed into that richer state of mutual understanding which needed not fresh kindling to maintain the fire. Not that the blaze had diminished; but now there was a foundation of living coals of love.

And these made the inevitable day of my leaving easier to

anticipate; for I calculated it would take the age-long period of separation between breakfast and supper to see the Bakers and collect my things (I did not fear that, now Robert Louis had gone, Andrew would object to my changing employers) and make two other calls — one a most pleasurable purchase, the other a visit I dreaded beyond words.

But it would not be the whole truth to lovers who read this to let them think that there was no shadow across the April of our happiness. Touch, while untalked of, still doubtless breathed; and while that process went on we could never be sure that he was not breathing threatenings and slaughter against us like Bible Saul. Then Robert Louis had gone before I could see him again and I felt lonely there. Curiously enough, he was the unconscious cause of our first quarrel, this way: One rainy morning Mr. Brewster came back from the village with a letter for me in that familiar and rapid-flowing hand. Hallie and I were drying out before the stove, after some chores and, little thinking of the contents of the letter, I had her read with me over my shoulder, puffing up with pride that she should know he thought of me so constantly. It ran:

*Hunter's Home*

DEAR MACINTYRE:

I am a hater of rudeness, in others at least, and I do confess that in the matter of letters my acts are but a mere injustice to the sentiments behind them. But much has happened. Lloyd has returned and we have finished up that lamentable foolishness of corpses and coincidence [this was "The Wrong Box"] to pay for a South Sea spree. I have spent my evenings poring over Findlay [and this was a directory of the South Seas which he did love to absorb, sounding by sounding] and so procrastination has stolen the pen of correspondence from my hand. And now we go to-morrow, leaving many good-byes unsaid, and nearly omitting a topic that I've been thinking on some while, which is nothing less than the hope of having you with us on our cruise — in Valentine's capacity, to a certain extent.

She, as you know, has the art of extracting from sunshine the gloom of the eclipse and she has a fanatical dread of my "lovely but fatal islands." In fine she won't go. Now look at the avenue that

opens, lad. Look right down a western railway to blue water, observe islands of purple, green, and white with natives of complementary colors squatting on their hams to receive us. It is a great chance for you to see the world—at least the watery portions of it—and we'd promise to return you to Hallie's arms (if you are so lucky as to have won them) within the year.

So think it over and address me at the Hotel Manasquan, Manasquan, N. J., and very soon, else we may be at the bottom of the Pacific, where neither you nor the post-office clerks can be expected to find us. I'll wire you the fullest of instructions after hearing from you.

Give my kindest salutations to the girl who evidently intends to claim you as a connection, and persuade her that you will return from the tropics a better-informed if not a broader-shouldered man. Anyway, come. No, not anyway—only with her benediction, but come. I have the Bakers' consent.

What you wrote about Touch inflames my professional curiosity as well as my natural anger. I long to hear the rest. If you desire to have him suffer according to his deserts, wish him a little worse weather than we have had. It is the worst you can do. I am through with your cold, brutal, bestial, blackguardly climate. I say a feeling good-bye to it, but to you but *au revoir*. Do you know what *au revoir* means?

Your friend,

ROBERT LOUIS

P. S.

To remove any reproach of being considered impractical I have opened this (and wasted a stamp) to say that we can pay you half as much again as you get from the Bakers, plus travelling expenses. That is lordly!

P. S.

After all, life is but a shambling sort of omnibus—or houseboat—taking one to one's hotel: ride with us.

P. S.

Do what you think right, Mac lad, and let the world fall.

P. S.

But do come.

I finished it, trembling, being unused to excitements beyond the tremors of her sweet presence. I finished, and looked at her. Doubtless the sudden glory of wide voyages, new adventures, and all in his company, shone from my glance. She

must have seen the quick exultation in me which was so natural to any man. It must have lit an immediate flame of jealousy in her. Of course I loved her; yet equally of course the sparks struck from this lightning look at adventure just given me were real. The involuntary joy in my friend's wanting me fanned her wormwood fires, and the tone of doubt in her voice — as involuntary as my joy — kindled me to unreasoning wrath.

"Are you going?" she asked in dead, repressed tones.

"How can I tell?" I answered unfeelingly. "One does n't say good-by to a chance like that as one bids the parson good-day, sure of seeing him next Sunday."

"I believe you love him more than me," she said very low. "You even talk like him." I was silent with astonishment, and she added: "It's so far. I don't see why you want to go so far."

"And you talk too fast," I said harshly, "and take too much for granted. I have n't said I was going. I have n't even said I wanted to go. You sound as though you wanted me to." Can you match lovers for unreason?

"Oh, you can be cruel!" she cried, but not loud.

"And you hasty," I said, already sorry and entirely down on myself.

She stood there a moment, measuring me with complete surprise and two tears lurking unshed beneath brave lashes, and unlike the rest of womankind scolded me not at all but dissolved my silliness in her silence. A flush came over me and I let the letter fall falteringly from my hand — which is the outcome that ambition and man-friendliness can expect when they run contrary to true love — and stepped toward her. Then the woman in her came to, and she tried to push me from her, but I would not be pushed and held her close to me, tight as a package, until she looked up at me through clear eyes, the tears having stolen away. It was a look of such sweetness as if wood-pewees were singing in wild honeysuckle



a bit plaintively, and she said, "But you won't go, will you, Mac?"

"No, my own girl; my foot is on the letter."

"But it is from him," she said, not without a trace of satisfaction.

"It shall not come between us."

We sat on the top of the wood-box and after a while she said, "I wish I had n't been horrid, dear Mac."

"You were n't."

"But I was. I wish I was always nice and — I bet you do, too."

"It was me who was rough, Hallie."

"You were right; besides, you're a man and I should n't have interfered."

"You did n't interfere, dearest. I would n't have gone, anyway," I said, laughing to think how near we were disputing whether we had disputed.

"But I did. Do you still want to go, Mac? You can, and I'll love you all the time."

"That is all decided," I said, marveling at woman. "I'm going to be right with you as we've planned out — with you, Hallie."

She gave a half-sigh of relief. "Won't that be fun! Such companions as we'll be, Mac!"

"We sure will, sharing everything."

"The same house."

"The same fun."

"The same food."

"The same children," I said, low, with a hug.

"Oh, Mac! I love children so!" she said, even lower. And I knew that our first quarrel had gone thundering across the horizon of our lives as some summer gust trails its gray down our valley — with sunshine galloping after.

So that evening I wrote to the Manasquan address. Writing to Robert Louis was not an easy job and when this letter

was done, after exertions that would have ploughed a ten-acre field, it didn't explain much. It was hard to believe that those fled idyllic days when he and I would skate were already gone forever; and the memory of wind-shrieking nights when the logs burned well made good-by, even by pen and ink, a hard thing to say. For friendship is to me a live coal: let the winds of memory but breathe upon it and it glows through all the ashes that sleeping whiles have laid upon it. But I knew that he would understand and I left the matter, satisfied that all is God's affair. And, remembering one line of that poem he said he was going to write out some day, I ended with it, hoping he would put it down:

Sing me a song of a lad that is gone.

And now my convalescence acted as had my friend: it departed, and I had no more reason for postponing my trip to the village. The snow was nearly gone, and though the earth was still cold with winter the sky had deepened into a piercing blue between white clouds, and Mr. Brewster said that we'd likely start out to the sugar-camp on the morrow, so hurry back. He had no need to urge me. The space of a whole day looked large and lonely enough viewed from this end without Hallie whom I'd been used to seeing a dozen times in the twelve-hour period. So I made my good-by on the door-step — just like a going-away husband might have had — a long one, and it was sweeter than any sugaring we were like to do. I went to the Bakers first.

When Robert Louis had called Mrs. Baker the salt of the earth I had laughed, but I see now that it takes such women to keep the world sweet, particularly our highland world with its seclusions, its strong feelings and hardships. She was sitting in the kitchen, that kitchen where he and I had had the great talk on the blizzard eve, and she was making beads out of old rose-leaves, whose perfume is to other perfumes as the rainbow is to mere color.

The welcome she gave me, mother-warm and almost sweet-heart-gay, set my mood on its very tiptoes for pleasantness, and to make matters as agreeable to me as possible she at once began delving into my affair with Hallie, mixing affection with chaff in a way that is more refreshing to a fellow in love than harvest buttermilk to the workers in the sun. She was not far from a beauty herself, with her black eyes and a slick head of hair, and sitting me down opposite her, she began: "Now, you set right there, Mac, while I jog out the crullers I made just yesterday. That's this morning's milk. Though I suppose you get finer over to your farm."

"My farm!" I echoed, greatly pleased.

"Well, well, it will be some day. What's time to a man in love!" She looked at me keenly, to try to discover how things stood.

"Don't you find me just the same?" I asked, amused.

"Almost as heavy, almost as strong; and dear, dear! — six weeks older! But, my, how six weeks do make a difference, sometimes!"

"Sometimes," I said with a mock mournfulness, to tease her.

"Love-making do take the time," she sighed, trying to hide her smile.

"Love-making? Does it? Well, the grippe does. That I can warrant."

"You've been away six weeks and the grippe takes only two, Mac, *unless* there be complications." She winked a little wink at the word "complications" and I must have colored up, for she went on: "Yes, yes, it's a curious disease. And I'm afeard it's left its mark on you, Mac. You did n't use to flush so easy."

"It's old sunburn you're looking at, Mrs. Baker," I said; but she persisted:

"It looks pretty fresh to me," and now I *was* blushing. "They say Strawberry Farm is rather an exposin' place. By

the way, Mac, I ought to inquire for Miss Hallie, now she's come in my mind. How is she?"

"Alone with her father just at present."

"Grievin', mayhap."

"Why should she?" I asked, hungry for the answer.

"Why should she! Wait till you're *in love* and you'll know." And she had me, as woman always will. "But don't hurry, Mac, in that business. Look twice before falling into anything so solemn. Now, for instance, take Alice Sanders there. She's got a heap more money, I hear, than that Hallie Brewster."

"Mebbe she has," I said, writhing a mite in my trap.

"And Elizabeth Beans; she's prettier to my way of thinking."

"Not to mine, then," I blurted out.

"Well, I would n't cross my heart to it, either," laughed my tormentor; "but come now, Mac, you don't want to be letting out your secrets to every chatterbox like me. There's lots of harm done in this world thinking a fellow's engaged to a girl, when he'd rather poke his right hand in the fire."

"You might as well know it," I said, vanquished. "We've been engaged for two weeks, two days, and twenty-three hours, if your clock's right, and I come to ask you a little question."

"Engaged!" she said, laughing and sitting bolt upright with surprise. "Then she was just in time!" and she brought out from under her apron a little box which she put in my hand.

My surprise was very real and my mystification worse.

"She was just in time?" I repeated dully.

"Open it — why not? — instead of gaping at me!"

Inside the first cover was another on which was written, "For Mac's Choice," in the hand of Mrs. Robert Louis; and, taking that off, I found a plush box and a little stone (an amethyst, Mrs. Baker said) winking at me from a little ring.

"But why?" I said, still wondering.

"Do you remember the afternoon you sat here by her husband when you were dying to run to her?" I nodded. "Well, that made a great show on the Missis — in fact, both of them. It's pretty, isn't it?"

It was beautiful, and it solved the thing I had had as much on my mind as Tess, even, or Touch. Then Andrew Baker came in and I must tell my story for them and ask them a thousand questions and soon we got on a soberer topic — the silencing of Tess, who was going around town poisoning my name.

"Hallie understands," was my rejoinder to their anxiety.

"But you can't have a screech-owl like her saying nasty things," said Mrs. Baker; "she must be silenced."

"It can't be done," said Andrew, shrewdly; "not with her particular sex. But she don't belong to this town and why should she stay here?"

"Yes, why should she?" thought I, and the knowledge that I had brought her to Saranac revived in me with a throb of despair. This looked like a logical judgment, and when I left the happy couple, with my ring box in my pocket and a deal of gratitude on my lips, there was an ignoble hesitancy in my breast as to whether to run home without seeing Tess or to beard the she-hyena in her den, my mother's home.

I compromised by steering out for the graveyard, to see what ought to be done there and get more time to think about tackling Tess, when, coming around the big granite boulder at the entrance, I met her coming out. It was an unanticipated disaster.

"I knew you'd want to be seeing her grave, poor little mite," she said. My heart touched a rib or two at the sight of her, thinner, whiter, and scrawnier-haired than I had imagined she could become in so few months.

"It is Ma's I came to see," I said. "Where is it?"

"I'll show you," she offered eagerly. "Being in the family, she's right next to your daughter."

"Tess," I said, stopping short, "how can you joke in a cemetery, and so horribly?"

There was more than a touch of hardness around her mouth — the mouth that had kissed mine so rosily in the raspberry patch that sunny age ago. "Do you think I'm joking? The jokes has all been on me, as I see, and I've no heart for returning 'em. No, I'm dead serious — and nearly dead. Look at them arms."

It was true they were painfully thin above the wrist; painfully hard and worn were her hands.

"Do you know who was in 'em last night?" she asked. "An old friend of yours, Ed Touch."

"Ed Touch! In this country? I heard he was off with the loggers."

"So he is. He left a message for you."

She gave it me — an infuriating remark about Hallie that left some dregs of dread in my brain. We stood before the two graves, pitiful plots, dragged gray by the elements. Their turf was too cheerless to cover animals, let alone the clay that had been haunted by the woman who gave birth to me, by the child to whom the woman beside me had given birth, and I did not wonder that sobs came from her thin, hysterical bosom. I felt a hopeless pity for her, yoked, however with a deep distrust. I thought of my own sweet girl out at the farm and looked at this who had repeated Touch's loathsome message to me, and I wanted to go.

"I hear you're head over heels in love," she began, holding to my arm, and reading my thoughts.

"Heart over head, it is," I said. "I wish you may find true love yet, Tess. It is a wonderful thing."

"Love? There is no such thing. But there's such a thing as poverty. And we might as well have this thing out, Anson MacIntyre. If you weren't the father of my child,

nobody is going to know *that*. I know you and Hallie Brewster want to hit it off and I've a tongue in my head. I have you in as pretty a fix as you men got me in. I can make it so you and Hallie won't show your heads around here. Now, what are you going to do about that?"

We had left the graveyard and I was wondering that very question in the utmost pitch of gloominess and rage when we came about the corner upon a group of loggers, gay in their red-checked shirts. She seized the predicament I was in for asserting her wifely claims. She pulled on my arm, raising her voice and saying, "I tell you that four dollars won't support me." Of course the lean-faced chaps turned and looked at me, the butt of this matrimonial to-do.

"I'll not live with you!" she cried.

"For God's sake! are you crazy, Tess?" I muttered, dragging her to one side.

"Will you see that!" she called to one ill-looking fellow. "Will you let a husband beat his wife about like this!"

"What's the good o' bein' a husband if you can't beat your wife?" he drawled, winking at her. The rest roared like a waterfall.

"But I'm not her husband," I said, furious.

"How long since?" she cried, looking funnily at me while they roared again.

"He looks like an old-timer to me," said the leather-faced one. "And in the old-time fix."

I was afraid to leave her there lest she go on from bad to worse, yet hurry she would not. "Are you coming?" I asked of her as pleasantly as a desperate anger would let me.

"Ask your dear wife sweetly," she said, "and she'll come."

"Then rot there," I shouted, unable to tread down my wrath longer.

"Is you mad, darling?" she cried, being possessed of a desperate devil. Squealingly she ran to me, throwing her arms about my neck, and her mouth printed on mine in the

sight of those loggers the ghost of that raspberry kiss — history repeating — treachery visible in the flesh. I flung her back savagely, and stood nonplussed.

The creature began to whimper, the loggers to murmur, one saying, "Serves the little fool right!" another, "But it's no way to treat a woman!" while she was sobbing out, "And him and me was just coming from the grave of our little girl." Oh! supreme actress she, supreme fool I!

"May you cry your filthy soul white," was the remark that rose to my lips but stayed within them, and when she turned and walked slowly down the street, the men looking curiously after, I, too absurdly proud to make any explanations to strangers, turned the other way and left the scene of ignominy.

I walked heavily out the afternoon road. The ring in my pocket had lost its light of happiness for me. I could not give it now. I could not even go straight to my girl when I reached Strawberry Farm. I felt matters were much worse than ever, with this parasite sucking at my reputation. The innocent do not always feel guiltless, and when she came upon me lurking over some outdoor chores I flushed as if I had a hundredweight of crime upon my conscience.

"Why, Mac!" she called, so fresh, so charming in the level glow of sunset — so infinitely wholesome compared with that blowsy, droop-cheeked, old-in-youth creature I had left — that all the craft of angels could not have added another grace to her. "I did n't know that you'd got back."

"Well, here I am," I said, trying hard not to show my feelings.

"Are you very tired, sweetheart?"

"I've had a bad business on my hands," I said, hoping to have the weight of that unwilling kiss off my lips.

"Not Touch?" she said quickly, looking deep into my heart.

"No, not Touch," I said, and stopped, for the next words stuck in my throat.



"Then nothing else matters. There can be nothing else very bad, can there, my poor tired boy!" And with her little smile came something even more convincing — and all my courage of confession fled.

## CHAPTER XXV

### WE GO A-SUGARING

**T**HE very next morning, with the sun standing in the doorway of a cloudless day, we packed ourselves into the wagon and set out for the sugar-bush. It was such a morning as would have impoverished a meadow-lark to describe, had there been any daring our tipsy season so early. The mounting passion of springtide flooded through the air.

Mr. Brewster drove and Hallie and I wedged ourselves in on the same seat, that very seat on which she had once sat (with more room) when the back of the wagon was occupied by Tess and me instead of sap-pails. How much air had blown over the ranges since then! And yet it was but one spring ago. Then as now the snow lay in shoals along the road cuts, like winter breakers, showing where the sea of spring was shallow yet. But in the forest the white was knee-deep, flinging back the caress of the sun with disdain. There is no false humility in snow.

"Did you ever breathe such air!" cried Hallie, whose hand was warm in mine, and who glowed with sprite-like zest of living. Such air had never been breathed, either. It went to the bottom of the lungs, clear and joyous, fresh from the inexhaustible stores in the immense wine-vault of heaven. It brought us the aroma of purity, the tang of untrodden places, the shock of rivalries between the frost and the immortal sun. It was such air as had run, laughing, with printless foot over great lakes, chased by the Jack o' Cold until it had

hidden, breathless, behind our ranges where it would catch its wind.

"Even the invalid feels pretty chipper this morning," said her dad.

"Invalid!" I retorted. "Don't you believe it. I could run rings about this bus, just from the feel of oats in me."

"More oats than sense, eh, Hallie?" laughed the red-cheeked man.

"I'm glad to see him a little coltish, Dad."

"Look out for your colt, Hal, that he don't mix in some wild oats with his feed." He gave a slow-contracting wink at me.

"A little wood-chopping ought to tame him sufficient," she said. "A cord of wood makes a good rein."

"Speaking of reins," he said, "I hope you two gets hitched up soon. This holding of hands so perpetual makes me do all the driving."

At that Hallie snatched hers free, clutched the reins, and gave the horse an inspiration, and we swept into the deep forest at a smart trot. The funny lurches of the wagon, the crystal glitter over everything, the humors of the squirrels — were these not enough to throw the shimmer of youth's perpetual joy over all? The ring in my pocket was beginning to glow again.

After Brewster had lit his pipe he began to mouth out tales of the old times.

"That's a short cut to Saranac Lake," he said, taking the pipe from his mouth and jogging my knee, "but it's hard sledding through the swamp, part of the way."

It was a remark dropped in between two fishing stories, with no especial reason for him to make it, no especial reason for me to come down from my dreams to hear it, and yet it stuck in my head to my eternal profit later on. There is no midden-heap in life: *everything* counts. I soon resumed my covert enjoyment of the morning while our road

ran through a great arching resinous grove of pines to come out upon the bush. The tall maples, naked with winter and gray with lichen and yellow with sifted sun, were shut in as closely by the conifers as are a maiden's wishes by her reticence. In the center of the sugar-grove stood the shack which was to be our home.

Although it was a day of sunshine shed down through a maple-limb heaven, it was a day so cool that no sap would flow. But there was much to be done in the way of polishing up apparatus, chopping kindling (the most of the wood had been prepared in the early winter), and putting the shack into a kind of order. It was a two-storied box with a large kitchen on the ground floor where we all should sleep, Hallie screened off by a beautiful birch-bark screen. Hay was stored above, in the loft, for the horse.

Forest duties are always leisurely duties, where, between bites of the ax, one looks about and breathes deep and goes to the brook for a drink, particularly if one's sweetheart is like to look from the window that one passes. It is a leisurely business, drilling into the gray-boled kine who stand so patient, ready to impart their sweets when the sun is strong enough to milk them. And most leisurely of all is it to gather up the tools at the end of the day's work, going into the warm room where a singing hostess has a large and excellent meal bubbling her accompaniment on the stove. And may God grant all men a one like ours! Her apron of gingham, her hair so lustrous and alluring, her faint, quaint housekeeperliness put on over her girlishness, like the apron, to be taken off when pleasantries could be permitted again — that is, after the supper is dished and smoking on the board. My, but the ring fairly bulged out of my pocket! I wondered how I should ever entice Mr. Brewster out so that I could have the gift-moment to myself.

He, however, had no thoughts of weddedness except constancy to his pipe and to the stove, and though we two had

many a giggle over the dishes and though he might have taken the hint and gone out to watch Orion start upon his nightly hunt for the Pleiades, I could scarcely take it on myself to banish him, either out, or to the loft. There the air came in at the same cracks that admitted much moonshine — cracks which gave me the idea. For it occurred to me to take her out with me while I fetched a pail of water from the brook.

So I went out and called back low to her and when she came to the door a fine cry escaped her at the very surprise of such a fairy-land. For round and white and high above the stealthy woods sat the moon. A light fit for the soul of youth to bathe in, lay through the air; and will-o'-the-wood shadows of the great paternal maples fell here and there along the snow. I buttoned her sweater around her and we said nothing across the crisp footfalls. But my heart was going *trip-a-trip* in its crowded bosom, she resting against it while we found our way through the pale pervasive night.

On the twigs of bushes a new hoar-frost had fallen which sparkled reds and blues in the diamond light. Far through the trees night faded into nothingness like the margin of a dream and the quiet was unutterable. Time seemed poised as the blue sky above, and sound to have been frozen into silence for the night.

She walked so close to me that there was no need for talk and my arm tasted of the curves of her body with that restless satisfaction that a night of perfect moonlight gives and I told her things it was a joy to utter.

"Do you love me that much?" she said with great tenderness.

"That much, and all the more that this"—and I meant the fairy-land—"is trying to say."

"It must be always so," she said, hushed.

"Completely and forever." And from where it had lain, bare and warm in my pants' pocket, I drew the ring. A flash

of moonshine leapt from it to join the moon. I slipped it on and I think she was almost surprised, however un-supposable that is in matters of love with girls. It fitted, and when I clasped her in my arms — where she fitted, too, as snug as if she'd been grown for them all her life — it suddenly seemed that life could hold no more. Her head turned toward me till the moon lit in her eyes the twin fires of rapture to guide my love forever and I knew then, beyond man's power to dispute, that I had been right and Ed Touch wrong: Love must be given, shining, whole, and any acts that have flawed it are haunters of that perfect silence which is love's embrace.

It was as pain to stir from the set delight of that silver moment. But the moon and the wide frost-work of the wood made too spacious a resting-place for love, and, one may add, too cool. So we moved and entered common speech.

"And the size is just right, sweetheart."

"Not too large?"

"Not too large. Besides, my hand is a little cool."

"That shall not be."

As we came in sight of the shack's square pane of gold in the lane of fretted gray we discovered that we had left the pail of water by the brook.

"Is n't that just like lovers!" said she, delightedly. "Would n't Dad laugh!"

We went blithely back, walking as much on moonshine as on snow, and she would laugh and then I would laugh and the sober old moon cared nothing at all how long.

Mr. Brewster was smoking in his stocking-feet and looking very sleepy and comfortable, but there was chaff in his eye as he looked up and saw us with the water-pail.

"Water? Did you go in to Saranac for it?"

"We've been gone only a minute," said Hallie, giggling.

"I never saw it freeze that much in a minute," and he pointed down to where we saw a film of ice that actually had

formed across the pail. "Hitching up's the only thing 'll cure you from this standing hand-locked and bareheaded till the frost forms on your thatches. I'll give you till June."

"But, Dad—" I knew she was going to say something about our affording it.

"That's all right, Hal. I know you're going to argy about independence, but you know Aunt Sallie's itching to decide what rooms you can have till you set up for yourself — if we must have any more buildings built."

"But, Dad—" and it was I who spoke this time. He went right on, and her hand, which was in mine which was in my pocket, gave a big squeeze. Presently he stopped and with an absurd look at her said: "A hand in his pocket already? Look out, Mac; they begin to rifle 'em early. But this looks to me like a record."

She pulled her hand from mine with, "It was n't in his pocket, exactly; and, anyhow, it's his hand now."

"Huh! I see he's beginning to decorate it!" said he, with a growl of admiration for the ring, which glowed with a warmth of beauty while my chest heaved to the full. "I call that — excessive, young man," he went on in high approval. "It's setting the standard of marriage too lofty. Now, when her ma and me got married . . ." and while we sat, busy with our own thoughts and each other's feelings, listening as became a proper son-in-law and daughter, he raked some experiences out of his own wedding garden, and, diving down into his pocket for his pipe tobacco once, he brought up a letter. "Great shakes, but I'm getting forgetful, Mac! Here's a letter that come for you three days ago," and he tossed me a fat envelop, in the well-remembered hand addressed to

ANSON MACINTYRE, ESQ.

which I tore open and we read, side by side, this time without fear, as follows:

## MY DEAR MACINTYRE:

Since you know my habit of not answering letters until all hope has subsided in the correspondent's bosom, do not let this sudden reply alarm you. For my rapidity is compound of two ingredients: one, knowledge of the very temperate speed of the mails in your parts, which makes me fear lest a letter answered normally be not conducted to you until you are married and have children and perchance grandchildren of your own, and, two, desire to convey to Helen and Paris the best wishes of the mild old foolish-faced Ulysses. I am wasting no periods to my paragraphs, for I know each will be punctuated with a kiss

Dear lad—and this my one serious word—art and marriage are the two main stand-bys of life. I have been piggish and taken each by the arm, for I had a horror of being one-eyed, and if I had not I could not have made this, my most overwhelming pronouncement of a philosophical life: that art is marriage, marriage should be art. So, lad, if you would succeed in marriage, do you treat Hallie as I would deal with literature. Think more of her than she deserves. Take her lightly as a cure for life, and be devilishly sincere with her. See the good in her and the bad in yourself and prosper by the discovery. And remember it is the critical spirit that kills . . .

Do you remember one night when this old, slim, unhappy devil of a Norseman (as I ultimately am) was writing undergraduate verse before the fire and you let loose the dogs of your wild and ravening criticism upon it? How tyrannical you were, and true, and how I esteemed your native honesty! Well, I wished to make you an engagement gift and could think of no baubles fit for one gentleman to send another, much less his lady. So I am concluding this owlish epistle with the echo of a sigh for your land and the wish that you two may prosper in it. One word more: Let me forestall your damnable critical ability by saying that I don't care whether "broom" grows in the Adirondacks or not. It looks like a huckleberry moor at a distance, anyway. And some day you must give her some "blue days at sea" under the guidance of that Master Mariner,

Your friend,

ROBERT LOUIS

Then came the poem:

## MAC TO HALLIE

I will make you brooches and toys for your delight  
Of bird-song at morning and star-shine at night.



I will make a palace fit for you and me  
Of green days in forests and blue days at sea.

I will make my kitchen and you shall keep your room,  
Where white flows the river and bright blows the broom,  
And you shall wash your linen and keep your body white  
In rainfall at morning and dewfall at night.

And this shall be for music when no one else is near,  
The fine song for singing, the rare song to hear!  
That only I remember, that only you admire,  
Of the broad road that stretches and the roadside fire.

We finished and she looked up, strangely moved. "You  
have had your wish, dear Mac," she said softly.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE HARVEST OF AN ERROR

**F**OR ten days we followed our cheerful round as punctual and bright as the great sun itself, never dreaming that the worst tempest which was ever to break across our lives was making, day by day, a few miles to the west. I had long shoved aside the thought of Tess and the kiss, of Touch and the seeds of malice in him. And if it was an error not to have told Hallie of the street scene, it was foolhardiness to have let remembrance of the lank youth dwindle and disappear in the glow of our new dawn. Of all these mistakes we were to be reminded by a harvest of tragedy which it is horrible to recall these long years past. From the experience, however, I have flailed out a measure of advice to lovers: go a-sugaring, and keep no secrets back.

One forenoon Dad Brewster left me to watch the big pan in which we boiled down the sap while he walked about marking some trees we would cut down in the autumn for the next year's fuel; and I, being summoned by Hallie for some little chore in the kitchen, remained over long, and to my great chagrin found the fire had increased and burnt not only the sap but the pan as well. Hallie came to my call.

"A nice, capable person I am!" I said. "What'll Dad say?"

"That it was an old one, probably."

"What'll he think?"

"I always think for him." She laughed, but I would not be cheered.

"I think I'll go to Saranac right off and cart one out."

"But Dad's going to use the horse this afternoon."

"I meant cart it on my back. I'll take that short cut he showed us."

She gave me an early bite to eat, for I wanted to get off before he came back to stop me, though I was really as strong again as a horse, and it was almost fun to be separated for a few hours, for the sheer joy in getting back to her.

"Don't stay long, Mac."

"No, Hallie-love."

Did she cling to me a second longer than affection needed? Was it portent? The last I saw of her was when I turned at the very edge of the spruce to wave. A shaft of sunlight fell from its long travels and rested upon her hair, a happy haven for even a tired sunbeam.

My run out through the obscure footway that led down the essence wood was full of pleasure to me. Solitude that was not desolate, an aloneness that was not lonesome, a short interval away, and then the welcome home. Over all my thoughts glowed the poised warmth of afternoon. I went, sometimes on bare ground, sometimes through ebbing snow, and when I came to the swamp I jumped from frozen hillock to hillock with soft leaps that would have made a snow-shoe rabbit envious. It did not seem long until I was gathering my breath along the village street and with much of it still ungathered I burst into the general store, post-office, and clubroom of labor's refugees, where the winter loaf was still in progress. Three or four loggers were lolling around and there was a rumble or two of laughter at my entrance. I looked ridiculous enough, I grant—panting, slush-covered, hot and steaming, demanding a pan, boy-like, with the one idea of haste back to Hallie.

"Looks as if you was running from another of them kissers," said a voice, and I recognized, through the store's dusk, the leather-faced lean one who had been a witness to my parting with Tess.

"Who's kissing you to-day, Mac?" said a pal of his, an old Placid man, sprawled over the cracker counter.

"Girls is worse nor the grippe, they's so catchin'," said a third.

"I ain't had that luck," said the first, again. "Did you leave her out on the street, Mac? I'm going to see." And he slouched to the door, while all of them echoed his footsteps with dry mirth, particularly as he was as good as his word and closed it after him.

"You're a inspiration to him, Mac, as your Mr. Stevenson'd say."

Ordinarily I should have enjoyed their chaff and tried to counter-blast them, but I was n't for anything but my pan and Hallie. And when a hulker of a chap turned the remarks into a foul channel, plunging me as he did from the crystal life of the sugar-time into a boggy floundering, my back-talk was curt, I suppose, and certainly not full of the good-fellowship that is the atmosphere demanded of store-counter life.

"Wa'al, don't get huffy about it," said the storekeeper; "we all can't be so handsome thet the girls rushes up to hug us on the streets. Not that we'd mind; would we, boys?"

"Not if they'd let it go at that," said one, and the rest laughed again.

So I discovered that my meeting with Tess was village property. She had evidently made much of it. It angered me and I cursed out the sort of people whose conversation was comment on everybody else's business or idleness, secrets or avowed plans. And I'm afraid I included the loggers in my wrath, calling them grandmothers and gossips.

"Christ, Mac! you've got proud, going with Mr. Stevenson so much!" said one, while the storekeeper was still hunting for the pan.

"Ain't he got an awful hump on!" added the first logger. "It may be the English way, but it ain't civil." And at this

they roared. A couple more slipped out after a word to the storekeeper, who told me in a moment that he had n't a pan, but that Shunk, the tavern-keeper, was n't making sugar this spring and would probably lend me his.

A horror of taverns had lived in me, deep-buried, since those times when I used to lie awake behind old Sol's, hearing them carouse, knowing that I'd have to lead a drunken Pop home. Saranac Lake has always been a seemly village, and compared with the spring freshets of Old Scotch in wilder places when the loggers change from a diet of river water to whisky the atmosphere could be called sober. Nevertheless as I turned into the tavern a band of the river-men came around the corner, hasting to their inevitable goal as saints, sure of Heaven's welcome, hurry to the Gate. From them I heard the name of Touch. We soon were all pushing into the long room together.

Intent upon the pan, I crowded to the counter where Shunk was busy. The room, bare-floored and noisy with the loggers' brogans, smelled of the vile stuff they were pouring down. Their faces, brutish, as if the hemlock bark they'd spent the winter getting had tanned their own hides, glowed with a dark joy. Their talk, which was mostly coarse raillery patterned with oaths, came and went; and my instinctive dislike strengthened into an indistinct dread as I waited until it came my turn. "What'll you have, kid?" grumbled out Shunk.

"I've come to borrow your sugar-pan till Tice can make me one."

"Sugar-pan! Where're you sugarin'?"

"Out to Brewsters'."

"Who's working with you?"

"Nobody except Brewster."

"Ain't his gal out there?" asked the logger next me. I nodded and asked again for the pan and from my elbow heard that old familiar voice with the clear, gay ring through it,

laughing: "Hello! here's my friend MacIntyre, joining the lap-dogs."

I believe I had boasted to myself many a time that I was ignorant of the ways of cowards, but I certainly had a sinking in the stomach to find myself face to face with this man. If there was malice in his voice it was well concealed. "Have a drink," he commanded, his fair clear eyes sounding me.

"I'm in a hurry," I said.

"Pour him out his panful, Shunk. He's got to drink with us."

"I'm in a hurry," I said again.

"Pour him out his panful, Shunk," he said, lower. "He's got to drink with us."

"I'm in a hurry. Have you got that pan?" I asked the tavern-keeper. He bade me wait till all were served and the coward in me was forced to inaction when only action could hearten him. My enemy was neither to be annihilated by my conversation nor silenced by my silence and so undistressed seemed he by our past encounters, so masterfully polite, that I had forcibly to remember that he was my enemy. There were others, pals of his, who copied the rôle better, the lean one who had left the store first foremost among them.

"I met her," he said to me, waiting with uneasy heels.

"Who?" I asked idly.

"A girl asking for you. She said she had a fresh lot from the factory."

"What factory?" asked one of the men.

"It don't concern you, Tom. It's between her and Mac here."

"A lot of what?" I asked him, indifferently.

"Kisses," he said and there was more laughter in which it was best for me to join.

"Don't you mind him, MacIntyre," said Touch. "Are you married yet?"

"Not yet," I said, as significantly as possible.

"Well, you might drink to my happiness," he said, "if you won't for your own. I'm going to marry. Guess who."

"The first one who'll set you up above want," I said.

"Come, Mac, can't you be a little decent, when I'm going to do you a favor? It's Tess."

My whole being leapt for gladness, but I said, "I don't believe it."

"I don't either," said the logger, laughing, "after what I seen on the street a week back," and he launched into the odious tale of Tess's kiss. Touch cut him off. "I'll not have you talking about my fyansay that way," he said. The rest were now gathered about us in varying states of interest.

Shunk came out of the back room and said he had some pans there and would I step back and look at them. Touch and a couple more followed, talking. "Mac," he said, real concern seeming to ruffle his voice, "I'm glad you come in, for there's one thing we had to fix up. Tess says you'll support her better than me and that's the only reason she won't marry me."

I looked into his face. He had not been drinking. I had not been drinking. Could this news be true?

"I'll not believe a word of it," I said, determined on caution.

"You dog in the manger, Mac!" he broke out. "First you cut me out with Hallie and now you won't let me live with your old wife."

"She's not my wife," I said, looking at the bottoms of the two pans. A logger came in and shut the door. That made three of them and Touch and Shunk, an audience.

"Nobody'll take that, will they, Lew?" Lew, the lean-faced, grinned. "No."

Behind my eyes danced the infinite relief of having her off my hands; before me stood the tall, blond fellow waiting for my reply.

"All I want from you, Mac, is a word to her saying you're through supportin' her. Then she'll have me."

"I don't believe it," I said doggedly. "I would n't believe it unless I saw you and her in front of the clergyman. And then I'd rub my eyes."

"Look a here, Shunk, bring in some whisky," commanded Touch. "We're going to have a little anti-nuptial party, me and the best man and the ushers."

"I'm not staying," I said, picking up one of the pans. The door closed behind Shunk and a logger slipped the bolt. With the rattle of the bolt Touch's voice changed, went hollow, and so did my inside. "So you're not staying, Mac?" he said, as sarcastic as Satan. I dropped the pan and made one jump for the other door. A logger impervious to anything but dynamite stood there and had me by the wrists. It was a swift, silent struggle, and in a flick of a sparrow's tail I was tied around the wrists and ankles and stood up against the door.

"There's two can play at this hog-tying game, my boy," said Touch, as cool as on that first night of card-play when I had stood shoulder to shoulder with him against the crowd. "Remember a month ago? But I'm not a backbiter. I'll not keep you as long as you kept me. It's lucky, though, you don't smoke, for I could n't oblige you with cigarettes like you did me. They was rolled beastly, though."

I said nothing, my apprehension worrying at my temper.

"You can blame God for sending you to town, Mac, but you can thank the devil for keeping you here," Touch went on with a sneer. "I'm the devil."

"Why is that?" asked a logger, when I did not rise to the bait.

"Because there's often things goes on that's nasty to look on at," said the devil. But I paid no attention to him, thinking between waves of anger of how sharp the ropes cut into my wrists.



"If it's close in here to you, would you like to walk down to Tess's and give her your permission to a wedding?" he asked. "You notice I'm fairly het up to have it soon."

"I'll not stir out like a gang prisoner," I said.

"On second thoughts, it's best to have her come here," he said as unruffled as if we were swapping reminiscences. "It's where I expect father-in-law, anyway."

"Father-in-law!" I exclaimed. "She has no father." At this all four men broke into a great uproar. I could only look incredulously from face to face. Tall, brawny fellows they were, in their hard twenties, and the hair along my spine rose at their laugh. "Wolves," I thought. "A pack of human wolves," and my birth-dread assailed me from the gulfs.

"Lew," said Touch, "after you've brought her run out and look around for a clergyman. These girls change their minds quick."

Then began a wait. The three emptied long glasses down their throats while I stood swallowing down an ever-mounting rage. Fear, and I may as well add prudence, had passed from me. I wasted no time in wondering what it was all tending to. All I thought about were Hallie and her father waiting supper for me while dusk gathered in the grove; all I knew was that I waited my captor's pleasure before I should be on my way to them, and if I did have pauses of supposition it was how I in clear conscience could turn Tess over to Touch as I longed to do.

The day faded through the room's one window. Touch mobilized all his powers of anecdote to entertain his logging friends and the bottle was tilted higher as day waned. At last, as calmly as if it were the most usual thing in the world, Tess and the logger appeared, he going out again immediately. She was very pale.

There was one circumstance that I did not understand. Tess was dressed neatly. It was the first time that I had

ever seen her more than three quarters presentable, and even her frowzy hair was mostly contained beneath a hat.

"Very nice and bridish!" was Touch's comment. But she did not smile at him in a very bridal way. "As luck had it, Tess, I found Mac here and seeing as he's a bit stubborn, as you know, we had to send for you."

She looked at me curiously and then dropped her eyes.

"Have a drink, Tess? It's good for the nervousness that goes with marrying."

"I never noticed it on you," cried one of the loggers, who was jolly full.

"Shut up, Spen, you hog," said Touch with a sobering severity in his voice, then blandly to Tess: "Now, my girl, Mac and I have had a little talk and I guess things is going to be all right."

Evidently it was not so clear to her, for she appeared in great trouble over the prospect. It puzzled me and I had, as any decent man would have had, to pity her.

"Be they?" she said faintly. "I'm — I'm not quite ready yet."

"The agreement we reached was this," continued the tall devil, looming gray in the half-light, "that Mac, here, is going to support Hallie for a change and me you."

"Agreement?" I said surlily. "I have reached no agreement." It seemed clear now that it would be a most dreadful thing to abandon the girl to his fancy. Hallie and I could find her work, or something better, at least. I had been the original cause of this final misfortune confronting her. I could not side-step that fact, no matter how many ameliorating efforts I had made in between.

"Do you go back on your word?" said he, as calm as a summer day but with an autumnal intensity in his tones.

"What word have I given?" I cried angrily.

"That you intend to marry Hallie," he said. "Is not that so?" I nodded.

"That you do not care to continue supporting Tess. Is not that so?"

"I do not care to," I said, "but there are easier fates than being abandoned to you." There was a tap on the window-panes from without.

"I'll give you ten minutes to talk it over," he said, lighting a lamp and examining my bonds. "Come on, fellows." And within a moment they had all gone as if they had long been intent on going.

"What does it all mean?" I asked of the girl, trembling near me.

"Oh! I can't tell you!" she said, half sobbing.

"Dare you untie that?" I said, extending my numbed hands to her. She shook her head. "He'd kill me."

"Well, loosen it, then." I heard the noise of wheels and a horse outside.

"I can't, Mac." The way she uttered my name caused me to look at her, closely. She was trembling, and suddenly she sat down by the table, put her head upon it, and burst into tears, saying, "Oh, I cannot! I cannot!"

"In God's name, child!" I said, as much distressed as perplexed. "You don't have to."

"Yes, I do," she said, "or he'd kill me."

Oh, this eternal weakness of tears! How many times has it brought us men into a predicament! For three hours or more I had stood tied hand and foot, and dissolved in wrath. No wonder that I felt like comforting another victim of his, no matter what she had done to me. Had I but understood! But I hobbled to her, puzzled by the intensity of her inarticulate woe. Had I but known that she wept for all that was fair! "Tess," I said, "was it his daughter — your little girl that died?" She signified, "Yes," with increased sobs.

"Tess," I went on, wishing to soften her grim lot, "Tess, trust me. We will defeat him. Hallie and I will make you comfortable, somehow."

Still her shoulders rose and fell with anguish — a double anguish. For she was succeeding at that moment in her premeditated plan and her success was to be the failure of her life. I could not comfort, nor talk — merely stand by her, that my presence might steady her grief — when the door opened, I heard voices of men, and turned to see the knotty figure, the terrible anger-darkened face of Hallie's father standing there. So terrible was the expression on his face, usually so bright with pleasant lines, that mine must have shown some reflection of his perturbation instead of the joy and relief I might have felt.

"Then it's true," he said, his voice harsh and knurly like frosted apples.

"What? What is it?"

"I did not believe. But now I see."

"Tell me — Dad. What is it?" I had struggled up from my attitude near Tess. She raised her head, tear-stained.

"What is it?" His echo rose to a quaver. "Just an interruption, you foul, you corrupt young man. Just an interruption. But I have seen. They said I would see. Now you can go back to her. Take this, though."

He threw at my feet an object that bounced and lay winking at me in the light, a gold circlet, a stone — Hallie's ring.

"Poor girl!" he added. "I did not believe, but I have seen."

I could not believe that I saw right. How could the engagement ring which had deified that night be lying there on the dirty floor?

"Silas Brewster," I demanded hoarsely, "what have you done?"

"Done? What was there to do? She made me bring it. She'd have gone mad."

Oh! The use of hands! Had I been able to hold my head to stop its spinning I might have patched words into sense. I

tried to propel my bound feet toward him. "Will you not tell me clearly?"

"Stay back," he warned, "for, old as I am, if my hands meet around your throat, neither you nor your hussy there can unbreak them." He wiped his forehead, dully. "There was one thing I had to do, one thing — Oh, my poor Hallie!"

He turned to stumble out, bethought himself, reached into his pocket and flung at me a paper, saying, "Some day — You may like to refer to that when you come to your right mind."

He opened the door. I heard Touch's laugh, clear, diabolical.

"Well, how's son-in-law?" he called from the dark.

I heard a mumbled reply, more talk from Touch, sharp words now, a scramble, as if Mr. Brewster had precipitated a quarrel; then a sound of bodies hitting the door, a cry from the old man. Still half in a stupor, I rose, and tried some progress to the door. Tess, alive for the first time, sprang to intercept me.

"Loose me!" I implored. "They are baiting him. They're drunk."

"You must n't."

"I will!" I cried. "He is the father of my girl. They may murder him."

"Stay, stay back!" she besought, catching hold of me. "He'd kill you, and me after."

"Are you mad? Am I?" My head hung like a shaken tree in a whirlwind of riddle. She hung on me, and the noise of their tumult died along the field behind the tavern. A ray of sense came back to me.

"Tess," I said, very calmly, "I believe you know what is happening. If I find later that you knew and would not tell me, may the Almighty take pity on you. Will you tell?"

A fine, flame-like feeling burned up in me. It was the

desire to do murder, and it burnt out the mist of questioning within me. "Tess," I said calmly, "you will tell me."

"They've gone," she said, hunting wildly around the room with her eyes as an animal might for a loophole of escape. There might even be a delight in killing, was my thought.

"Gone? I hear that. When will they come back?"

"Never." She said it quite low.

"Then loosen this." I showed her the rope knot, that kept the blood from my palms.

She shook her head, staring hard at the door with a fixed stare as if she would like to pass through it and leave it as it was.

Suddenly my eye fell on the paper which he had thrown back. I stooped to pick it up. She snatched it from my clumsy double hand, unwrinkled it, and showed her teeth in a tigress smile, a vision of white hatred I should never have thought possible.

"Read it to me," I commanded.

"You might as well know," she said. "It's too late to matter much."

And she held the paper in front of me:

**MR. BREWSTER:**

I've found another girl livelier than Hallie and have changed my mind. Please ask her for the ring and leave it to Shunk's Tavern. Sorry to trouble you.

I read it again, automatically. Then again, the third time. Somehow the words would n't fit into my mind.

"Is that all?" I said. "Is it all about a damned joke like that?"

"Hallie won't think it's a joke." She put her hand over her mouth.

"Hallie!" I jumped to my senses. "What about her! She'll — she —"

Slowly and with heavy sadness, as a mother awakens on the

day after she has buried her son, the reality of it rounded itself in my imagination.

"Why did you say that about Hallie?" I thundered.

She looked at me derisively.

"Speak out!" I threatened. "There is nobody to overhear except God. Tell me what you know or I'll kill you more surely than ever Touch will." The fierce flame leapt up in me. She fixed that searching look on me, her face as pale as a piece of sheeting. "I'll tell you if you'll promise —"

"Promise!" I felt like spitting upon her, low, infuriating, eye-glittering she-beast that she was. "Tell me *at once!*"

"He — he is going —" She stopped for lack of breath, panting with fear of me, yet longing with malice to taunt me with what she knew. And I — I was helpless, hobbled, hand-locked, and while I feared now their errand, I was feverishly anxious to make sure. I assumed a gentleness that sat ill on the blood and while she was on one side of the table and I on the other, leaning heavily across to hear her whisper (which was a condition she imposed) she tortured me with hints of his plans. And at last I surprised a word of truth from her and built up the rest and as the significance of it fell on me the blood left my liver. For days they had been awaiting my coming to town. They had arranged the note on a previous chance remark of Brewster's about the ring. The decoy had worked. Hallie was awaiting her father in that lonely place: she would receive — Touch! And the wolves.

When the horror of it had possessed my brain, most of my reason left. I picked up the lamp, to hurl it at Tess. I held it high, trembling in my clumsy hand-bound fury, enjoying the awful scream, the cowering run, the frenzied fumbling at the door. In an instant she had opened it and in an instant it slammed, leaving me a prisoner with my rage at her, my fear for Hallie. I lowered the lamp unspilled, and

hobbled to the door. But it took two hands to hold both latches. I tried with my hands and chin, tried with my hands and teeth, pounded and cried, but was a prisoner still. And when the first frenzy had left me I ordered myself to sit for one moment calmly down and think — think what Touch would do in such an emergency. And I thought of his cigarettes, of fire, of matches, of the lamp; and in an instant I was searing the flesh of my wrists but burning into my bonds nevertheless. In a short space of torture that I scarcely felt I was free — numbed with the binding, dazed with the extremities of the sudden disaster that had befallen me, but free. I put up my hands, my free hands, to my head and thought, and my eye fell on the ring.

“If I hurry,” I said to it and, stooping, put it into my pocket. I lit a lantern.

“If I hurry,” was the one thought that began welling up into my brain. In trembling haste I undid the double latch, stepped into the fever-cooling air, and almost trod upon a figure crawling on a knee and two hands. In my disordered state I had almost jumped it on the run when it gave a cry, “Mac!”

I stopped short, turned the lantern on it. “Thank God!” it said, “I was coming to undo you.”

“Dad!” I cried.

“Quick! To Hallie! Take after them. It is only my ankle.” I had stooped beside him. “Don’t stop with me.”

“Then you know,” I said, a world of relief coming over me.

“I know, my boy. Quick now, and God bless you! I’ll get aid.”

So I did not go back toward the village, to rouse the Bakers. Her safety hung on my getting to Hallie before Touch. My burning of the pan which had brought me to town I saw now was a gratuitous offering of the devil to



Touch's design, just as my knowledge of the short cut was God's offering. Soon I had turned off the road into the trail.

The blood had got back into my feet. I ran faster, stumbled less. It was dark night, but how spacious and sane after that awful room! Only did the yellow birches with their beards seem to be hostile, grinning at me as the lantern-light struck their faces. What was Touch not capable of in hate! What horrors awaited my sweet girl at the hands of those three half-drunk, wood-lonely animals urged on by the grudge-filled and implacable creature whom we had kept bound so long! My lantern swung, now on the pale figurements of maple, now on the paler sightlessness of birch. And as I ran I calculated.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### WHISKY AND WOLF-SONG

**M**Y way was about four miles to the sugar-camp, while theirs was a good seven. I had my recent foot-prints in the thin snow to follow, while they were to travel a road with several misleading cross-paths. I had put neither food nor drink inside me, while they could be trusted to keep the flask well plied. But they had at least an hour's start. I ran in a great fit of speed, not daring to risk the margin of a minute.

At first the newness of the exercise, the eager air, the flashing of the lantern on great boughy trees that revealed them like forks of still lightning, and then plunged them back into darkness, raced companionly in my blood. But the quick exhilaration soon passed and a tide of darker prospect followed. The pulse of my heart extended over my body. That sickening breathlessness and side-ache which come from too immoderate a beginning at high speed slowed me. The way deepened with difficulty as I neared the swamp. And this devoured my strength, for the footing was worse than insecure. As I jumped from tussock to tussock, like a great blind hare, the joy of the afternoon made the darkness even denser and in a black moment I slipped, the lantern struck the ice, and the glass broke and ran over the smooth surface in a thousand crystal shivers that snickered derisively at me as the night smote down. My heart broke with that fall.

Yet could I have refused to rise? It was then that a flash of the infinite courage of Robert Louis lit my night.

I clambered up, grubbed my way to the end of the lowland, dove through alders with harassing slowness, and followed my old footprints in the vague under-light until I came to a great birch. From it I made a quantity of torches, though my spirit cried out at that delay.

They had not all burned out their oily lengths before I burst through the banded ranks of spruce which girt our grove, and stopped for the profoundest minute in my life, listening as only a hunter knows how to listen. Now I would know her fate and mine. There was no sound. There was no light. The shack loomed dark against the naked dimness of the lighter trees. All was imperturbably silent and my hopes were torn, for the ghastly cold of apprehension realized began to quiver over me. The night, cloudy and still, seemed halted as if the whole machine of God had gone wrong and stopped. Yet I made no sound. The cloistral sadness of past joy was heavy upon the place and, as I groped into the narrow doorway, the intermittent sputter of greasy birch in my hand was the only noise.

So full was I of the conviction that Touch had come and gone, so sure that the infernal echoes of a struggle had just died from the empty place, that when my torch disclosed the room in perfect order my first feeling was not relief but surprise.

"Would she go *without* a struggle?" I asked myself.

I stepped in and looked around the partition and was struck to weakness. There she was, kneeling by her bed, her head pillowed on folded arms, her disordered hair streaming about her face, a sacred picture of sorrow. I stared, my spirit lifted in thankfulness, at her whom I had so nearly lost.

The torch was nearly done. Its shifting brilliance had not wakened her who seemed crushed to insensibility by a world of misery. Her breath came irregularly as if dreams still pursued her after her agony of sobbing had driven her into the tanglewood of sleep. With trembling anxiety I hunted in

my pocket for the ring, slipped it upon the limp finger, and then with a kiss strove to awake her from the dead.

But the world of misery under which she was crumpled lay too heavy still and I took her in my arms, as gently as possible, but full of dread lest I hear a sound at the door. Her eyes opened, but to no sense at first, and the torch shone back from vacant eyes.

"Hallie," I said, "it is Mac, your own Mac."

She gave a little struggle and said, "Mac, is that you?" with incredible sweetness. She gave a shiver and awoke to wildness and a scream. "OH! OH!" she cried, pushing me away. And the sound of that cry will ever be the cruelest echo in my ears. "Is it you?" she said, still pushing. "I sent the ring. I sent it, I tell you!"

"Dearest, you have been dreaming," I said. "Come, we must run. There is a great danger threatening."

"Dad took it to you," she cried, her mind still running on the ring.

"You have been dreaming, dearest. It is on your finger."

She looked down at her finger, for I was busy with the expiring torch, and she said very low, "Am I mad or am I really dreaming?" I could have broken down at the pathos of her cry.

"You are awake, sweetheart," I said softly, "and your Mac is here to protect you."

The torch flame bit at my finger and I dropped it. Instantly the night swooped in about us, standing close by each. It was as if eternity spread upon every hand and only the central fact of our love kept us real. And as we stood, silent, keyed to the breaking-point to hear if love was so, there came through the distance the echo of a shout, a few top notes of a drunken song, followed by a silence ghastlier than death.

"Hallie," I said, trembling, "where are you?"

"Here," she said, very low, and in an instant was quiver-

ing in my arms, while we involuntarily held our breath, listening. Again there rose the soulless, drunken baying, nearer. Men's voices in chorus have always been the most beautiful thing in the world to me, but terrible since then.

"What is it?" she asked.

"We are hunted," I said, trying not to communicate to her the terror that had laid hold of me. "Give me your hand and we will run for it."

"But I have no shoes on."

Again broke out the roar of their chorus, not so far from the clearing now, and the horror of the hunted filled us. It seemed too terrible to have her even hear it, let alone guess its significance. I was feeling for her dad's gun.

"Where is it?" I asked. "It is n't on the rack."

"He took it. Mac, I can't find the shoes."

Closer now and we could hear other noises besides the medley of brute song and obscenity. I struck a match to find the shoes and a great shout came from the edge of the clearing.

"That is Touch's voice," cried my girl in sudden realization. "Oh, Mac, save me!"

"I'll carry you; quick, this way."

But we had got to the door when I saw how hopeless it was. The foremost lantern was twenty paces away. "They're drunk and licentious, dear girl, and not very brave. We'll fight for it. Quiet now."

He was five paces off. He called back for them to skirt about and not let her escape if she got by him. We stood silent as the black shadow we were in, hardly venturing to breathe. He called once: "Hallo, Hallie! Come out, Hallie, my ——."

She stood without word, not even breathing to be heard, though her body close by mine trembled all its length. He stumbled over a rock, with a vile oath, and stood to direct

the others not ten feet from us, his bull's-eye on the ground. The light-edge moved, approached us, reached our doorway, our feet, our faces, and as a cloud blows from the moon, we stood revealed before him.

He stopped. "You sly dog!" he cried, startled. "I left you in Tess's arms!"

Hallie quivered at the mention of that woman. He added an obscenity that set me boiling. I knew I must plunge now or prove my heart a coward's.

It took but one stride and I was upon him. I heard, as it were impersonally, my fist obliterate the insolence of his face. He dropped his light. I dodged his blow, hearing but indistinctly the rush of men; saw, as in a blur, lights racing in; felt a confused pummeling.

Thanks to the swiftness of the attack, the ferocity of our initial struggle, the attention of the three others was kept from Hallie. They circled about us, spotting us one instant and losing us the next. I had him and he me; yet none of them could put in a quietus without endangering Touch. I had no thought except to despatch him. They were all more than half drunk, as their confused quarreling and shouts betrayed. From Hallie's quarter there was no noise, no shrieking. I hoped that she might have put on her shoes and slipped into the forest, but I had no voice to call.

What are the thoughts of a man in the fight of his life? I do not know. It was not as if it was I who fought the rough-coated, lean-muscled man who grappled with me. Nor was it I—at least not the person who had planned and loved and lived in the forest—who kept the others from closing in. I hit and wrenched and strove with no reference to the usual me, but with that stronger genius of myself which was usually sleeping in my lesser times.

Soon the first fury lessened. Soon one of them got a hold upon my foot and dragged me down. Soon we were rolling in an inextricable mêlée, Touch and I and that other,

churning upon the ground as if we were in the monstrous gizzard of a nightmare. When suddenly there was a cry of "The girl! look out for the girl!" and Hallie, snatching up Touch's bull's-eye, was upon us, witch-haired and white in the din of things, armed with a poker. They had fallen on me, when I heard a blow and a cry. She was shrieking something and I heard more blows, more cries, felt the load lessen. One man lay still, a length away, and turning the light upon him I saw her hand raised, saw the blow fall and blood spurt from his dead, disfigured face. Like curs they drew away, and with a cry of anger Touch saved himself by leaping back into the darkness.

"Quick," she cried, "quick for my sake, Mac, into the shack!"

Swift as the passage of a lake flaw it was over; we were withdrawn into our castle, the door shut and barred by the stove, the lamp lit and put on the floor to be safe from missiles. They too had edged back into the darkness, whence angry voices in dispute came to us.

"You have saved me, Hallie," I said, dropping with fatigue on the floor. "I could not have held much longer."

"Oh, but you! How splendid!" she cried.

For near an hour my girl and I kept watch, while a confused quarreling came occasionally from the grove: but more often a deliberate cold silence assailed us with its greater apprehensions. There was nothing we could do. Having had only the easy capture of a girl in mind, they had brought no weapons in their drunken hands. And, preferring to get Hallie alive rather than dead, they could not fire the shack, which must have suggested itself to them. So, thanks to their evil desire, we had a chance to draw a breath while they quartered, now here now there, discussed us, circled the house as one dog circles another, smelling at, growling at, but not attacking. Unfortunately the night was chilling their whisky fumes as the hours wore on, and it seemed as if they were

waiting for daylight to finish us. But, then, might not Mr. Brewster soon bring aid?

Suddenly, a little after midnight, the oil in our lamp was spent and it flickered and went out. A moment after I heard Touch calling his company to him. He had but two in complete health, the other having been broken by Hallie's poker-plying, but at that three men as against a man and a girl in a shack were sufficient odds to give them courage when leagued with darkness. Our only weapon was the poker and, if it must be mentioned, a broom.

We heard them drawing stealthily upon us in the dark and a fear enwrapped us. Hallie stood near, her back to mine, her gaze directed toward the murky space which was one window, while I stared at the obscurity which was the other. My wrists burned, my head throbbed, but my heart sang. If this was my last hour it should be one which I should retell to Robert Louis with some pride as we sat before some hearth in heaven. This waiting should not unman me while I could feel the firm bravery of my girl behind me, though the few moments of their creeping toward us, the rustle as they disposed themselves for a rush, were far worse than an attack.

"Dearest," I whispered, "be brave a little longer and we shall win out."

"I am happy with you, Mac."

"If we live through, Hallie, promise you will be mine at once and forever."

"I am yours now, dear Mac — and forever."

"My hero girl! There! they are coming."

A simultaneous shouting, as of a pack on a fresh scent, came from three sides. A pair of feet, legs, body came through my window and I brought down my broom with precision and force: I was unable to finish my man before a terrified cry came from Hallie and I must rush over to her in the dark, where the other logger, the lean, leathern one,



was grappling with her. He had the poker soon wrenched from her and had not Touch turned his bull's-eye on his face suddenly and blinded him one of us would have enjoyed a quietus on the spot.

Telling this, I can go as slow as I like. In reality the affair was as swift as the passing of a squall over a darkened lake. Touch I rushed for, and was battered back from. Hallie gave a scream as one got her by the hair. I flew upon his throat. Lanterns left outside threw a reflected light on the ceiling, very dim, very eerie, and an atmosphere of yells, thwacks, stumblings, and curses made the night thick in the room. Had there been more light we should have been killed outright; as it was, we edged out and toward the loft stairs, fighting close together; and in the passage of a moment had dashed up the stairs before they realized the new maneuver, were caged in the loft and sucking in our wind while they groped and cursed in intimate passion down below. This second stage of the battle was clearly theirs. They had got possession of the ground floor of the castle, had captured our only real weapon, the poker, and worst of all, were coming into their wits as the night wore on; while we, on the other hand, were much the worst off from the prolonged suspense.

This time they were not to delay. We heard disputes as to who should lead the rush up the stairs, who should follow; and Touch, being the master still, arranged for the lean one to come on. By looking down through a knot-hole we saw them in the dull reflected light, walking about. They were a disheveled, brutal trio, desperate now. Only Touch seemed to have kept his humanity, his coolness.

I lit a match to view our quarters. It was a small loft with one window, too narrow to escape from. A pile of hay filled one half and the light of the match was reflected sharply back from something. With a smothered exclamation Hallie darted for it. "How could I forget it!" she said to me, as the match went out. "Take that."

I took it, my fingers running down the smooth pole till they came to two chill prongs. "Good pitchfork. Use it well," she whispered, a viking hardness in her voice. "If necessary, sweetheart," I whispered back, feeling the sharp points with the thrill of mastery running up my spine. Down-stairs they were still discussing who was to lead.

"You do it, Touch," said the lean one.

"Are you afraid of a broom?" he said, coolly sarcastic.

"If you get the prize you ought to get the pains," said the other.

"You shut up or you'll not share the prize," growled Touch; then, coming near the foot of the stairs, he called: "This is your last chance, MacIntyre. We're going to beat you and leave you in the house and burn it. We'll give you one chance to slink out now and we'll treat the girl gentle. But if any more heads gets broke—"

In the distilled light I saw the outline of my girl and drew her to me, calling down: "Have you forgot so much as to offer me that, Touch?"

He did not reply, but we heard more consultation in the pause. It was then that we had the idea of pulling some hay nearer, to throw upon them. I heard the door opened, felt the cool air sucked about us, and heard a cry of triumph as one came in, and we saw the shine reflected from steel. They too had found a weapon, the ax.

"God help us," said she, very low, but without fear showing.

"You are very brave," said my hand-clasp on hers.

At last they gathered at the foot of the stairs, the lean logger leading with the ax, and then, his new weapon up-raised, all yelling viciously, we felt them mount the steps. Suddenly the light went out, for Hallie the sorceress had thrown a great double handful of hay-dust down the way. It filled the air, the senses. Blinded, they rushed on and, desperate, reached the top. Closing my eyes, I charged into them, using my pitchfork as a lance, entering the dust-logged

center of turmoil and slowing up against some blinded soul. There was a sharp cry of pain, a yielding of a body, and while my stomach turned within me I knew that I had stopped them.

It was such an instant as passion could scarce conceive. The dust-choked murk of air, the agony of the stabbed logger pushed by the brutal tines back into the tumble, the yells of the two behind him, ignorant of his fate, the sides of flesh, the smell of blood, the inexorable energy of that sweet girl beside me, who was still throwing dust into their faces while I pushed, pushed, pushed them to the stairs' brink.

With a tiger leap Touch hurdled all opposition and was atop the mass. With equal exertion I gave a final push and the insensible clogging of the steps moved. He clutched me. We were going down. The dead-weight of the injured one rolled down upon us, hastening the descent. The other logger had caught Hallie. As the vast welter of our bodies rolled toward the bottom new furies swept me. I let go the pitchfork, to throttle Touch. In the feverish choking dimness the lust of survival was hot in each. From the two men came a storm of imprecation, mixed with choking and the growing smell of the dying logger's blood. I sought Touch's throat. I was no longer human; my one wish had forgot Hallie, had concentrated on that throat. To vent my passion on him—that was my single purpose—and after crushing the throat to close those eyes that had mocked me in the afternoon. I forgot that vengeance is the Lord's.

But the Lord reminded me, for as we slowly reached the bottom, sometimes I being under and sometimes they, a shrill scream from Hallie came from the bottom of the heap: "Mac! Mac!" It turned my veins to ice. I burrowed. Though my eyes were closed with dust, I burrowed into the hot, solid flesh of them, felt her dress, her arms, her head, her hair. It was taut in the grasp of a darkness-hidden hand. It was not Touch's hand, for his were groping toward my

neck. It was a fatter hand, but it had pulled back her head until that cry she had given was her last possible. Her throat was so taut that a blade of grass could have slit it from ear to ear. I bit into his fingers, conscious all the while that Touch was reaching nearer to the strangling of me. I bit, but he held. I felt along his arm for his eyes, but he was buried by that bulk of dead flesh, the pitchforked one. I bit into his arm where it was softer. I felt the sinews relax, felt his hold loosen. With a cry to God for help and a gigantic effort I rose from Touch's swift-balked clutch. I rose, gasping, tasting blood, and pulled her, half-senseless, to me. With her in my arms I freed my feet from the mad mass, lurched toward the opened door, and stood, reeling but free, beneath the blind black sky.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### IN SANCTUARY

**S**OMETIMES I think that because of the harshness of nature we have created love; because of the unpermanence of love, created God.

Certain it is that without those twain I could never have added a rod's distance to my labors of that night. Yet with God for my rod and love for my staff I first carried Hallie, and then led her, from the scene of the great fight and greater fears. My one thought was safety, and as a trailer to that, rest, and I could think of no place where we could be assured of both except that once-used cave up Caribou. So thither I took her, with many stoppings, with many torches, and with some misgivings otherwise.

For if you ask why a desert cave in a wilderness for a maiden instead of her home, I can only offer the excuses that circled through me during the silent intervals of that pilgrimage. One man lay dead in that shack with Brewster's pitchfork through him. Another had been dragged away with his head flattened by her poker. And the arch villain still lived. If we could appease public sentiment, how could we still escape the violence of Touch and the logging friends of those two unfortunates? What refuge was her farmhouse to her now? What would that man with hate as a fire in him contrive next for us?

Of these things I made little argument with Hallie. It was enough that she agreed with my conclusion and trusted me. In a stupor of fatigue, and fear-spent, she haled her-

self around the great rocks that made the northern entrance to the pass in the slow dawn. The soft breeze sang of a southern world that knew only perpetual tenderness, of warmth. It brought the same thought to our ears as it had brought to the firs and a feeling rose in my blood like an invitation from that land.

"Will you go with me, there?" I said.

"If you will take me!" was her answer.

"He will never find us there," I suggested, "and we can have a little home, not as far as the city, but far enough from him."

"And Dad? He can visit us. Are you sure, Mac, he's all right?"

I repeated my reasons for believing so, adding:

"But it will be just a little dreadful to leave our mountains."

"Yes, a little dreadful," she sighed. "But, then, we have each other."

With no more thought, with no words more, we climbed, step by breath-faltering step, moment by nerve-stretched moment, until I saw the old familiar opening, until I lifted her upon the browned balsam bed of those age-past days. I soon had a finger-tip of flame curling about the dry wood which a worthy habit had left piled for such emergency. I had uncovered the blankets from their cache in the dark dry rear. I stretched out, too, knowing that the end of the world had come — that old world of struggle and hatred, of fear and pursuit from which we were retreating. When we were rested the new world, opening southward from the pass, was to begin. When we were rested.

I had not intended to sleep and when I woke it was to the sense of loss, of something sobbing. I sat up. It was already late afternoon and I found that she was still sleeping beside me in the utter relaxation of tideless slumber. She

was quiet, and I found that the sound of sobbing was the long moan of an upper wind, high on the mountain slopes. Down in our abyss, only from time to time did faint eddies of it descend; but up there the hurrying glory of the dawn had changed into the wild disorder of threatening storm. Spring was about to burst upon us fiercely as is its mountain custom.

Our cache of supplies was very slender, and it brought back poignantly the day that Touch and I had hid it, to come back partners. Partners! And the remembrance of the fearful struggle in the shack came over me. We were to have trapped and sold the honey and been friends — and now!

I looked at her, pale-wandering in the other world, yet so instinct with this that a mere hand on her shoulder, a mere word in her ear would catch her soul from Paradise and recall her to the perils and pains of this old world. I wondered how I could be gentle enough, be good enough, to win the right of her, so lovely though so overweighed with weariness. I laughed a little to myself, saying, "Get her some food, Mac, and bung the sentiment," and I thought again of Touch and the honey. I would get honey for her.

It did not take me long to cross the pass and arrive there where he and I had fled the sullen swarms a short long year ago. I kicked the damp snow aside and exposed the mouths of some subterranean hives. There was no danger now. Still drugged with winter, the bees kept within. Not one rose buzzing out the omen of as fearful a death as could happen to one who disturbed them when they were awake. I put down a stick and tore out some darkened combs, piling layers of it on birch-bark that dripped with the sweet stuff, licking my hands but refraining from a meal until we could eat together. Then I returned to the cave, twilight glowing through the thin places in the dark cloud-land above me, the moan of firs in the increasing wind coming down to me, and

the soft wailing of the valley far below mounting through the dusk. Oh, what a relief to find her there! I should have died of homesickness for Robert Louis, for the Bakers, had I not had a greater than these at call — the heart's content of love.

While the day held I felled thick birch and beat back the feelings of hunger until she should awake. And when she should awake would she be brave Hallie still? It was a question I asked myself often in my pauses with the rusty ax. When would she awake, was the form my query began to take later, when the gloom of overhanging storm had driven me into the circle of flame-light, where the honey dripped sweetness into the waiting air and the beat of storm wings increased in the invisible night.

"Is that you, Mac?"

She murmured the words, her eyes still star-bright with sleep, her face flushed into a rose beauty from the ardor of her warming. Those were the words she had awaked with once before — to what a different awakening!

"Sweetheart," I said, kneeling beside her, "all is right at last. Are you rested?"

"Yes," she said, taking a breath of content, "and so hungry!"

"You are having supper in bed to-night, so settle back and I'll serve you."

She laughed with the peacefulness of love at rest and settled back into the blankets which we had once shared, Ed and I, and tried to guess what meal I had conjured out of the wilderness.

"Corn meal!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I love it! And tea? Oh, Mac!"

"And guess," I said, holding a bit of honey out of sight; "something as sweet as you almost."

"Lemon peel."

"Nope," severely.



"I give up," and because my mouth was watering like a clover-fed cow's I showed it to her.

"Honey! You don't say, Mac!" Her surprise was delicious.

"What do you suppose folks eat on their honeymoon?" I could not resist saying.

"Anson!" she said, as an angel might rebuke one with a flash of white, and the implied request in her tone, the implicit trust in her glance made me resolve on no more jokes of the sort.

It was such a meal as any two wood-wrecked wanderers might bless with prayerful eagerness, and as we ate there blossomed that well-being and comfort that comes with rest and food and the coziness of outside storm.

"What are you thinking of, Mac?" she asked once, when we had both stopped talking to listen to the fire's song and the under-swell of water voices from the brook, to the over-tone of storm that was as yet not rain.

"Can you ask? There is only one feeling in me: thankfulness."

"Only last night!" she whispered, giving her hand to mine.

The swift mind of memory ran over the past in an echoing of thought: the scene in the tavern, with Tess, with her father; the run in the dark; the finding of her; that waiting for the second attack; that sickening moment when I had run him through, that leather-faced man!

"Hallie, am I a murderer?"

"A man is surely allowed to save his girl, Mac!"

"That is true; particularly after she has saved him." I held her to me as if there were arms outstretched from the blackness beyond the fire to pluck her from me, and our thoughts both swung to Touch.

"And he might have been your friend," she said, shuddering.

"It was here we swore eternal friendship."

"And it is all over."

"It was over long ago."

She was silent longer before she asked, "Does love get over, too?"

"There is a difference between love and friendship," I said.

"What is it, Mac?"

I had no reply ready. Friends must be forever strange, it seemed.

"Friends are but borderers on that land that love inhabits, Hallie," I said; "forever borderers."

"I am glad that love lives in the land," she said contentedly. "I could never bear to move."

And later, after we had been quiet long, she said, "Poor friends!"

I thought over the brief past: how I had admired him at first, till my admiration stood on tiptoes to be like him.

"He was n't worth you," she said suddenly out of the silence and I knew that her mind was still on the trail of my thoughts.

"Say, rather, we were n't the same kind."

"It is the same thing."

"No. For if we'd been of the same kind the bigger of us would have made the other step out of himself. The biggest friendship is strong enough to do that. Somehow I ought to have *made* him do it."

"Well, you made Robert Louis," she said, trying to comfort me.

I had to smile at that. "Dear heart, Robert Louis created me. I did not befriend him. He discovered, somehow—"

She put a playful hand over my mouth as she had over her dad's that first day we met. "Quit it, Mac!" she cried. "You'll be saying next that I made you love me."

"That is likely," I said through her fingers, "when it took the biggest blizzard of all time, the best mortal efforts of the finest man who ever put his mind to romance, and a grand succession of the nervousest moments that ever a fellow had, to win you. But you're mine, anyway, dearest. Say so."

She said so, and for half an hour nothing else was anything like so worth saying as to make us clutter the dear silence with words. Only it was silence rimmed with the sigh of rain and backgrounded with the feel of the giant equinox which was to break on the peaks in imminent fury soon.

As on that other night of arctic blast and equatorial clothes-horse, I made my bed as free from sticks as old balsam can be made, but with an invisible curtain of restraint between it and hers. I did have all my due, for she put her arms about my neck and said:

"Good-night, my hero lover."

"If not your husband yet," I added, laughing.

"No, dear Mac, not yet."

But when I had replenished the fire and laid me down farther from her than there was need, I heard her calling softly.

"I must be able to touch you in the night," she said.

So I reached out a hand that could just touch hers and both found comfort there.

The first drops of the storm fell hissing in the embers, the roar in the high wood deepened as the innumerable voices of the rain began to swell the chorus of the wind, and great peace fell upon us. "At last," said my genius to me, waving back the array of evils yet to face: the evil energy of Touch still bent against us, the exile into a foreign land, that despite our coming marriage would be exile yet, to say naught of poverty. "At last," said her finger-

tips resting so trustfully in my ax-hardened hand. "At last, true love," said something in the voice of Nature, and then the murmur deepened and a billow of sound, gathering me up, swept me into oblivion.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### A PARTING

SOMETIMES spring comes to us Adirondackers in a night, and it was so that spring came to us that year. During the long darkness that Hallie and I slept in the cave — or, when not sleeping, whispered things and listened — spring moved in, preceded by a tremendous cleansing by wind and water.

We woke late to a changed world. The air had become warm as milk, the ridges of snow an incredible memory, and the soft-breathing wind in the hemlocks near our cave woke that stealthy-footed feeling in nature that whispers, "Live," to all. Winter had been smoked out of his particular hive, our Caribou Pass, and at our feet the white had become green. Dead ferns, the dripping remnant of summer's past resolutions, promised a carpet for May. Overhead a soft blue fell like a blessing through the windows in the stately elonds, and when I stepped out and looked upon MacIntyre a new sun shone on that grim forehead that had weathered the night.

"It says good-by to the bygone, Hallie," I cried.

"What does?"

"Everything. The wind, the sun, the brook: they all are looking forward once more."

"It is too soon yet," she said prophetically. But I would not be turned around.

"A little hot tea will set you on the trail," I said, laughing; "the trail that they're all beating plain, the trail to summer."

"It will take more than hot tea to keep us from being trailed," she said, smiling a little. "I can't help seeing clear, Mac. It's not over yet."

"Rest is what you want, honey. I'm glad you're none the worse for it all, but naturally you need more rest. A couple of days here, and then we'll start on that long hunt for a minister. We'll go through the pass, around Avalanche and Colden and the Flowed Lands, down to Tahawua, Minerva, and North Creek."

Her loveliness looked up at me as if to apologize for being practical; as if she hated her own apprehension but still held it for truth.

"And I'll slip down to Placid, rifle my Pop's pantry, and come back quick. It'll only take six or seven hours with the speed I feel like now."

Instantly she went pale. "But six hours, dear Mac! Suppose he should come! I died once, waiting for you, that—that afternoon. I never want to be anywhere again without you."

I gladdened right through me. "But we can't live on honey, tea, and meal forever, sweetheart."

"Have I forgot all the brave tales you used to tell me about wandering through these woods for days on ever so little?"

"But then I was n't in love. Besides, we won't want to show ourselves before we get to North Creek and I don't want to lose those dimples that smile when you're happy—and fed."

"Well, I've a good store of fat on me yet." She and the dimples smiled.

"Thank God for your sugar-shanty pies."

But her smile waned. "Don't go, please, Mac. Something tells me you must n't. I have a horror that something might happen. The sun has gone under."

"Then I will fetch it out," said I, feeling very mighty in

my love for her; and, sure enough, as I made her smile, out it came. "Now call me something nice."

"Persecutor!" she said, laughing, for I'd taken her in my arms. "Do let me do the dishes."

As the dishes consisted of two cups out of which we had alternated the corn meal and the tea, I had to grin.

"Are you going?" she asked, like a pioneer's wife, obedient to necessity.

"I'll tell you how we'll decide. We'll do up our blankets and the meal and go down and dig a lot of honey. Then if it looks right we can push on. I hate to decide on an empty stomach."

She brightened. "Digging honey sounds so silly," she said, "just as if we might rake up a little bread and butter somewhere to go with it."

"Like that land that was flowing with milk, for convenience. If we lived there I'd say, 'Hallie, I'm just going to run over to the cream spring and dip out a fresh bucket of it. There's company coming.' And you'd say, 'You forget, Mac; there was a thunder-storm last night and it's gone sour, like as not.'"

"Whatever would we give them?" asked Hallie, her professional interest aroused.

"Oh, you'd say," I continued, "'Just jump up-stairs to the preserves closet, Mac, and bring down that jar of water we sampled last night.'"

We both laughed at that, and went on sillier than ever, trying to make each other think that leaving the land we both loved meant next to nothing to us. But despite our best efforts the gloom fell and it was a sad couple that left the Eden that was home.

However, Hallie's interest increased as we neared the great bee vaults and the morning laid a caressing hand upon our shoulders. Gleams of sunlight fell upon the snow-crushed

vegetation, and moved, groping for the seed of life to nourish with new warmth, while a drying air fell softly as an eagle feather from the inverted gulf of blue.

The eerie light and the unseen presence of the myriad companies of bees made us the more careful to avoid all sound, all unnecessary motion, and we were among them before we noticed renewed activity among the rocks.

"Goodness, Hallie," I said in a whisper, "they're awake! We must be careful."

They were indeed awake. Spring's reveille had found them ready to arise from their six-months' sleep and looking down into the stained-mouthed craters we could see a moving mass, crawling, working toward the light. We could hear the confused hum of unseen multitudes marshaling for work upon the distant lowlands. Now and again a lean-bellied tawny-striped bee would detach itself, creep to the edge, circle upward into the dim-featured gloom, and be gone.

My girl kept close to me as we threaded our way among the entrances to the awakening volcano and when she touched me I felt the nervousness, the portent of her earlier mood pass into me. I remembered how I had laughed at Touch once when he succumbed to this uncanny fear, but now it was mastering me. This wild company of bees, so weak in the unit, so mighty in the mass, guided by blind instinct, performing such miracles of life, awed me. It seemed more than nature, yet less than intelligence. It seemed heartless, a multitudinous business armed with death. If we should disturb them too far, was there any justice in them to which we could appeal? Was there any gentleness to count on? It would mean instant, horrible death, and I took Hallie's hand to help her by a ticklish spot.

"Let's go, Mac," she said in a hushed voice. "I'm afraid."

"So'm I, sweetheart, but we must get more honey."



"No, no, Mac. I'd rather not eat anything for days than watch you try to get it."

"There may be some hives that are n't awake, dear girl. Anyway, they're just bees and I've fooled bees lots of times. It's because the light is so queer that we're scared."

"No, it's something more. It's something more than the dreadful gloom and that *hum-hum-hum*. It's foolish of me, dear Mac, but I wish we'd go."

She took my arm. Her foot dislodged a pebble and it rolled down the uneven slope a yard or more into one of the bee pits. Instantly some of the winged scouts flew ominously into the air. "Stay still," I hissed to her and motionless we stood, my dear brave girl not breathing nor crying out while they made swift designs in the air, restless, remembering, doubtless, dim ancestral repulsings of disturbing bears. Their wrath was presage of what would have happened had it been a larger stone, but they refrained from attack. Soon they had circled farther, and, tasting the spring air, had dispersed before we moved or spoke.

"There you are, Mac! You see you must not try. I'm glad we brought the blankets for I could never go back."

"There is worse death than starvation," I said, trying to recapture some of our earlier gaiety. And, glancing to right and left, I saw the slippery sides of ancient unfeeling rock which would make that death impossible to escape if I should, perchance, stir them up too well. The horror of running that hostile gantlet came over me and I turned to lead her out, honeyless.

As one's fear increases when running from one's shadow in the moonlight our panic grew upon us and we had got to the end before I even looked into any more holes.

"This one seems possible," I said, the honey-hunger opposing my cowardice. I hated to confront a cross-wilderness trip with no sweets for our mush, leaving whole caverns of it under foot. And at the very extremity of the colony a hive ap-

peared either empty or not yet awaked from winter and I thought that it was worth experimenting with, as we could easily fly down the trail at the first song of danger. So Hallie waited behind a great rock that projected into the pathway while I began removing the rocks from the entrance to the vault.

My nerves were keyed for instant alarm and hers must have been horribly strung, for the cry that she gave, low, almost voiceless as if it was a dream cry in the paralysis of fear, made me clutch the stone that I had in my hand with instinct-given energy and raise my eyes with fear-directed speed. They formed for me an unforgettable picture at the end of that dim ravine: a man, advancing, rifle rising to shoulder, behind which shone the pale features of debauch.

"Touch!" moaned my girl.

"When *you* move *I* shoot," he called out of the dimness.

I thought it quite probable and did not move.

"Just let me get a little closer and I send you to the same hell you sent Mal Anderson with the pitchfork holes in him."

He moved toward us, the rifle ready to leap with its charge if I changed my position. We hunters are pretty good at winging a deer on the upleap and I did not dare the two bounds it would take to get to Hallie's rock.

"I'm no butcher like you," he said. "Let me get a little closer and you won't feel it. But *she* will. I know where she is." And he gave a clear laugh. He was incredibly the old Touch.

He moved slowly, as it took some caution to keep the sights on us and himself out of the bee pits. Hallie, like the good frontierswoman she was, made no noise after that first cry. She could not run without exposing herself. I could not turn to look at her and thanked God for it.

"He will not get me alive, Mac," she called. "Never fear."

"If I die, it is happy in that promise," I called. I had no

nervousness now, thinking, "I shall do this, I shall do this," and clutching the rock with which I intended to do it when he got nearer. It was a question for the Almighty to decide whether he or I fired first, and I left it to Him.

The man had got where the trail was most strewn with bee craters and moved very cautiously, swearing to himself and calling to Hallie, evidently with the lees of whisky still strong in him. She said no word. I could not even tell now whether or not she was there, for I must watch. The exact place that I decided on would determine our lives and yet I felt less excitement than I had many a time hunting birds' nests.

"Pretty soon, now," he cried tauntingly; "when I reach that rifle rest."

He meant a flat, tall rock he had to pass. My heart leapt once with the information. It was my undoing, for I began to tremble.

"You can say you're sorry any time now," he continued, moving by inches.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but for other things than you think, Ed Touch."

"Then don't explain. My thoughts is good enough for me. I'm thinking of a cave where you spent the night."

I could not answer.

"There'll be others there to-night. Eh, Hallie?"

He was having difficulty getting around a lot of holes and was still a few yards from the rifle rest. Hallie made no sound. I hoped she had crawled away. "Eh, Hallie?" he said again, relishing his thoughts. "But Tess'll miss you, MacIntyre. Any last messages to her?"

"Yes, take her *that!*" screamed Hallie. The unexpectedness of it brought my head around as if there were no rifleman ahead and I caught the furious fling of her arm, the gasp of her scream, followed the shower of pebbles that flew toward him, biting him like bees and falling into the craters all around.

"You devil! I'll get you," and without aiming he discharged his temper and the gun at the same time, both harmlessly. And in that instant I leapt to her.

Immortal instant! The pebbles had done their work in it. About him rose an almost invisible darting of motes in the saturnine light. A sharp cry of pain, of fear, reached us. The motes multiplied in number. He was fighting them and as he fought a living sudden cloud rose from the ground and enveloped him. A wild scream of terror cut the dusk of the ravine, cut it as a panther's cry cuts the noises of night. His hat fell, he threw his rifle away, and stamping, blindly battling at the living air, screaming, he became the center of a sickening combat.

Hand in hand we watched, if to watch is the term for staring in the paralysis of horror. Released from sudden death, I felt the sweat stand out upon my forehead; and now this fearful thing caught my stomach and turned it ill. And yet there was no taking oneself away from the spectacle of it. A mad, intangible sound that smothered the reason with its fearfulness rose note by note until it met the last despairing scream of the tortured one and drowned it. Ever more slow spirals of bees rose from the earth and revolved and fell upon him. Lead still weighted me.

"Come, come, quick!" cried Hallie, pulling at me.

"Why does n't he run!" I asked of the rock.

"Take me away, dearest, take me away!" She was crying and her tears tapped some reservoir within me.

"Quick, dear; run that way and I will follow."

I took one look at her, deadly white, the horror in her eyes asking me what I meant.

"A blanket, love! give me a blanket."

"Oh, look! look!" she cried, the sight still pulling our eyes. He had fallen and was writhing, a blind mass, upon the ground. It decided me, even as she became aware of my intention.

"Oh, Mac! you cannot! you cannot!" She had knelt before me and clasped my legs.

"I cannot refuse, not while he lives. No white man could." He had risen, a staggering torment, and fallen again.

"Mac!" she cried. "Don't go, as you love me."

"God keep you, you cannot understand."

It took a second to break her grip, for the grasp of desperation was around my throat.

"Run, my dearest; do not watch."

"Am I so weak? Forgive me, Mac." And she helped wind a blanket around my head and shoulders. A second's run took me down the trail. No caution now. I entered the smother and half the horror fell away with action. I grasped him about the waist, gave a gigantic pull. He came free and I pulled him lying limp across my hip, pulled and dragged and made progress, out of the zone, down the trail, pursued, but lesseningly, the roaring in my ears falling behind; and when at last I stumbled, exhausted, it was far, and to know the danger over.

Into a rivulet I had stumbled and where it seeped out of green moss I laid him, laid what was no more himself. I rolled in the ooze to quench the last fire of the bees that still clung to me and closed my eyes beneath her caress, and opened my heart to her sweet tears and words of love.

But with the crisis past I was no good. The awfulness marched by in living detail and I cried bitter tears. "If I had run at once," was my one thought, and it burned into me as the quickness of the stings I had received subsided.

The sun fell softly through the living green and the stream-mud on my wounds quenched the torment of them, but the inner hurt seemed unhealable. For a long while she soothed me and the dear hand on my brow, the dear lap that held my head were balm to everything but that one moment's hesitation. "If I had run at once," echoed through me and I

dared not look at that rolled and bloated form that once had been a man.

But love conquers all and finally she had soothed me into a sleep, my head still in her lap. Once I woke from a terrible moment, crying:

“His eyes, Hallie! his eyes are blaming me!”

“Hush, dear; they are closed,” she said.

“Ah, dear heart, that is what hurts! They never saw me coming.”

“God will tell him,” she said, and looking into the refuge of her face, the blue haven of her eyes, I found consolation there, found healing for my torn spirit, and dropped off again to sleep and no more dreaming.

## CHAPTER XXX

### WE MEET WITH GOD

"MAC! Mac, dear!"

This time I woke to no dream of my own but because a kiss on the forehead and soft hands brushing back my hair pushed aside the curtain of my unconsciousness and I heard her voice whispering, "I think the loggers are coming."

She was trying not to be frightened, but at the horrible word I sat upright, staring. "Where?" I asked hoarsely.

"Don't you hear them?"

It must have been afternoon, and the middle of it at that, for the ravine shadows had already stolen forth for their meeting with the night and from the ridge opposite I heard voices approaching, calling back and forth.

"What shall we do?" she said. "I am so tired."

"We'll hide, here," I replied, having the spirit neither for fight if it proved necessary nor for flight. "Come this way."

I got up with a groan more of weariness than of pain, for of that I was singularly freed by her applications of mud on the stings. As they neared we went up the ravine side across from them, climbing around huge boulders that topped one another, some stark bare, others green with townships of lichen and counties of moss, the very nesting-place of timelessness in that silent shade. Thirty-five or forty feet above our rillet where I had slept we hid, nestling close in a crevice upholstered with aged lichen and moss, to spy upon them. Their shouts had been stilled for a while, but soon sounded afresh and almost on a level with us.

"They must have gone around the bee place," whispered my girl.

"Thank God for that. Listen, they're just there."

And as they came down the opposite slope we could make out, first a word now and then, and soon their figures dropping from ledge to ledge and jumping into moss.

"The one you slung the poker on." I pointed to him.

"There's just the two," she said.

"I bet he's skipped with the girl," said Hallie's victim, angrily, coming to the bottom of the ravine with a last leap.

"Damn his white hide if it's a second goose hunt."

"But he could never do for that MacIntyre alone."

"Not if she's kept the poker with her, eh, Bud?"

"A humdinger, that girl!" He felt his head as if from habit.

They scanned the tracks in the bottomway with the skill of men long used to reading the large print of lumber-boots and soon were discussing them in low tones. Once they quarreled, but soon united on a course and began to move toward the mossy stream on the bank of which lay that hideous bloated memory.

My breath moved neither out nor in as I watched them, so unconscious of what lay about the turn ahead, such animal-healthy creatures about to adventure on the visible end of the brute. Along the winding trail they came, waist-swallowed in the under-green of silent forest. My hand closed over hers, that shook not for breathlessness as the imminent sight ate into their eyes.

Beyond the first oath of utter astonishment they made no noise. There was no doubt in them from his clothes that this was their leader, this misfeatured thing, and standing now on one leg and now on the other they wiped their brows with their bandanas, and I suspect their eyes as well. Then, after an interminable time to us, after a consultation while the night came on, they stripped some balsam and laid it over



him, lifted him between them, and disappeared along the back trail until all was once more swathed in silence.

"It is over, at last, dear heart," she said, "over at last," and lifting my chin gave me a look as tender as eyes could that had not quite shed their tears.

"Yes, it is over," I said, willing to let the past dissolve in weariness, and unable to endure even a thought as to the coming moment. The strain, ebbing, left me a limp soul and but for the darkening hour and the need for one effort more I could not have faced the bitterness of things. But she was sweeter to me even than regret, more needy of care than a plucked lily is of water, and so with infinite heaviness of spirit and body I left that last retreat and started back with her to the cave.

In the veiling twilight we stole along the ridge between Caribou and Avalanche, our way made easier by the habitual wanderings of deer, until the familiar ledge greeted us with its memoried embers, cold and dark though they were, and that curious affection for a place once beautifully inhabited took us in its grip. Tea and corn meal may not sound an appetizing ration, nor the stripped limbs of trees an alluring bed; but famine and fatigue are excellent persuaders to enjoy what is at hand, and we soon slept the sleep of those who are willing to forget the past.

Night had its way with us, and the way of wilderness night is sweet beyond conjecture by those who do not know. And with the opening of my eyes upon transplendent day there seemed to roll off of me forever a nameless oppression. And when I looked across the arm-length abyss that kept me from my love and saw her there, watching me with a smile of bewitching tenderness upon her lips, there came over me all the goodness of my lot.

"Hallie," I said joyfully, "we don't have to go, girl. We don't have to go."

"It is just what I was thinking, Mac."

"And I have you, to-day, to-morrow and —"

"Just what I was thinking," she smiled.

"And I am due my good-morning kiss."

"Just what —" It was I who interrupted, this time.

To look back at our youth-time and that morning! We looked into the universal dawn; and then floated back to earth for breakfast.

"If you were a perfect wife," I remarked later, "you'd sew up that," and I showed her a tear in the sleeve of my flannel shirt.

"A careful husband would see to it that the breakfast fire is built before noon."

"And I need another button here at the throat."

"I'm always going to have it open that way, Mac. How did you get so brown?"

"And then there's socks to be washed."

"Clear out!" she said, laughing and pushing me away.

"It's stylish to fix up in your own dressing-room. We're stylish now. Remember we live in a palace, as Robert Louis said in our poem —

"I will make a palace fit for you and me,  
Of green days in forests and blue days at sea.

"I will make my kitchen and you shall keep your room,  
Where white flows the river —"

She broke off, laughing, and pointed to the ravine, where could be heard the rivulet.

I went out to my dressing-room, where the little stream had worn a deep smooth-paved pool in the light gray of the granite. And there I stripped me of shoes and shirt, standing a moment in that most genuine of morning prayers, adoration of the white magic, Life. The cool air filtered down through the tiers of grave old trees and I caught

glimpses of the shining heights of my own mountain, MacIntyre. For the first time I lived.

And then the dip! That stream, even in summer, dreams of the glacier which was its ancestor and that morning was far from summer yet. To feel your way to its deepest, to recline a moment in its green negation of all feeling, to scramble breathless out, and then — and *then* to feel life come back to the senses, to burn and rub and tingle, to fire the spirit until there is nothing impossible beneath the sun, if you want to do it — that, that is life!

"Anson MacIntyre, you're a fine fellow," I said to myself, drying off on an old jersey, "and damned lucky, don't forget." And while I fell to admiring my own legs, for their firmness and the ventures that they had carried me through, I had the sense to think of Robert Louis and the glory that he had opened out for me, his clearing in New Friendship-land. It was a memorable getting-dressed.

And when I'd combed my hair with my fingers, looking in the pool's mirror, I mounted to Hallie, who had a fire miraculously cheerful and breakfast boiling on it.

"Good squaw," I said, and she, catching the twinkle of my mood, gave me back my jests until that breakfast was like to last until midday for our very desire to have such pleasure go on forever. And then, in the very pitch of our merriment she proposed the thing that had been the circumference of my whole thought all morning.

"Do we have to go — ever?" she said.

I pretended to think that she meant south.

"But I don't mean that, Mac. Do we ever have to leave here?"

I looked at her in glad amazement, still questioning just a little.

"Can it be worse than it is?" she said.

"We — might — explain." I tried to keep back the sudden hope from my voice but it must have shone in my face.

"Oh! You're just a boy, Mac! Now listen."

I listened, and then stripped her plan of inessentials. "You know, Hallie, I could never drag him out here to marry us. We'll have to go in or do our own ceremony."

"Don't let's go in," she said, looking up at the great mountain, who was doubtless grinning at our little human absurdities. "What do you think makes a marriage?"

"An agreement."

"And people to see it? Witnesses?"

"For those who are n't sure."

"But we are sure, are n't we, Mac?"

I easily proved that to her, and she said: "Then we don't need witnesses."

It took no argument for me, after I was dead sure that she was willing. "Have you ever seen Avalanche Pass, Hallie? It's just the place to meet with God and have him marry us. There's a little point the sun strikes on at noon, where the mountains go up on all sides just like a room, a chapel for the Titans, and it is n't half an hour from here."

"Stylish again," she said, smiling; "we'll have a noon wedding."

So we packed up our blankets and our little store of food and went across the crest of Caribou and down, down upon the silver-flashing splendor of the ice-white lake. It was a great frozen jewel, sun-washed in part, mountain-guarded on both sides. And at the first view of it Hallie stood with an exclamation of delight, yet more reverent than mere delight, for we were going to take upon ourselves in all earnestness something which only complete faith justified. And we were holy with the happiness of it.

The point I had thought of ran from the northern end out into the lake a few rods. The unclouded sun fell along the midday length of the radiant floor, which was as the floor of heaven for silver edged with gold, the sky the only roof, and the great granite mountains rising in precipice and slide for

sober pillars of the eternal. A few strokes of the ax built us a fire and a fire spells home to wanderers. Hallie could not have done looking at the giant buttresses of heaven and after a while she put out her hand and said, "They are our witnesses."

It lacked a while before the sun should have laid its blessing on our point and with the hooks that a true Adirondacker carries always in his hat I put Hallie to fishing through the ice for our wedding-feast, while I should fashion out a camp. I picked a place a few yards back wherefrom an outlook could sweep our hearts if we chose and yet the fringe of trees protect us from too vast a scene.

As I conjured the familiar lines of a lean-to into being from the sweet-smelling poles of green timber an exalted feeling made the labor the most exquisite pleasure. Often I would pause to hang the picture of this moment in my memory. Between the boles of the balsam glittered the lake, on which beat the sun with blinding but ineffectual might. My mountain soared with shaggy sides on the right, and Colden on the left rose beyond range of eyes. Behind me lay the virgin forest, dim, solemn and serenely beautiful. And out on the lake my sweetheart awaited the moment that would merge our destinies.

I laid the floor deep with the flat fronds of balsam boughs and clothed the sides as I had once clothed it in my thought. But this time I need await no future. This was to be our imminent home, and the bed I wove so luxuriously deep was perfumed with the distillation of earth and sweetening sun. And when I had finished I called her.

She came, bright with the white companionship of the day, and in her face shone love, entangled with her sweet humanity, yet maiden-modest and confiding. We both were strangely calm, and yet my heart beats now at the mere memory of that noon, those mountains, and the miracle of my beloved, as she came to give herself to me, those thirty years ago.

"All ready, Mac?" she asked; "and what we say thought out?"

"I've been singing it to myself, sweetheart."

"Then wash your hands," she said; "they're all balsam. Is n't it a day for happiness!"

At the point of noon, enveloped in the white blaze of the lake, warmed by the still radiance of the beneficent sun, with all the forest rapt in the windless splendor of the day, we stood, bareheaded, on a mossy knoll, the birch fire burning cleanly by, and took each other by the hand.

"Dearest," I said, "repeat it after me with the changes you need make," and I began:

"In the presence of God and of His mountains —"

"In the presence of God and of His mountains —"

"I take you, Hallie Brewster, to be my wife —"

"I take you, Anson MacIntyre, to be my husband —"

"Promising with God's help —"

"Promising with God's help —"

"To be to you a loving and faithful husband —"

"To be to you a loving and faithful wife —"

"Until death."

"Until death."

We stopped while the mountains said, "Amen."

In the afternoon, while the pinnacles of day still shone with joy, we took our wedding-trip. It was but five minutes long, only across the little lake to the foot of my namesake mountain, where we sought a bare rock not easily reached by the chance adventurers of summer. And when we had found it, we carved with some labor this notice on the black cliff:

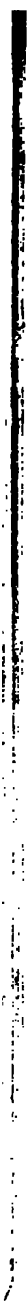
Anson MacIntyre

Hallie Brewster

married here

April 12 1888

Which, if you know where to look for it, may be seen, abiding as fresh as ever, to this day.







**This book is under no circumstances to be  
taken from the Building**

[illegible]



